COLLECTED PERCEPTIONS FROM THE ASSOCIATIVE MATERIAL : HENRY SAXE

Graduate Seminar Paper

April, 1979

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Problems arise when trying to look at an artist's production during a specific period of time. Confusion ensues about the context provided by the continually expanding corpus and the parallel development of an "associative field".

Philip Fry uses the phrase "associative field" to describe the visual documents which illustrate the corpus in an abbreviated selection.(1) My preference is to consider the associative field as consisting of all the published material specifically about the artist or overtly making reference to his or her work.

Recent additions to the corpus modify the entire corpus (2) and present previous production for re-evaluation. The re-evaluation is useful for grouping works by affinities or contrasts. Relying totally on the corpus for associative information limits the contextual reading to the internal relationships among the works. At an extreme it allows for viewing the work as an extended conjunctive.

One need I felt was to establish a body of material that could be drawn upon for additional information - information that could provide a history of the works' reception, material responding to the production. The previously described associative material, seen in total, without categorizing it according to quality of criticism, met the requirements to be considered in association with the work and the artist.

The research on Henry Saxe resulted in a bibliography of fifty-two articles. They ranged from newspaper reviews to more extensive, major catalogue essays. The first published source appeared on January 11, 1962 and thereafter they appeared with an unexpected regularity right up to the present. Of all the associative material, Philip Fry's involvement with Henry Saxe's work seemed to be the most extensive. The initial reasons

for gathering the associative material came out of a need to clarify what I saw as omissions and systematic generalizations in Fry's writing. The combined perceptions drawn from the associative material would provide, obviously, divergent views on the reception of Saxe's works. By correlating these views, the material could be used to temper the singular focus of Fry's reading of the works.

Fry counters Saxe's description of his work as "a lyrical interpretation of a concept" with phrases like "Maybe lyrical, but it seems to me the square-as-model makes it more... well, visually coherent." (3) Phrases like this of Fry's show a marked attempt to avoid motivations for the work that are non-structural or non-specifically functional.

Philip Fry's catalogue essay (4) maps out both the "material possibilities" and the inventory of procedures. He also includes the idea that the technical choices of procedure are governed by acceptable standards common to work of similar function undertaken anywhere. While his insights offer access to the works, Fry's tendency to rationalize Saxe's "Licence with the image" (5) tends to negate the usefulness of the categories he sets out in the organizing and understanding of the activity. He avoids the intuitive gestural nature of the production activity - an activity, responsive to the material at hand, governed by personal standards appropriated from the conditions of everyday construction and fabrication procedures.

Philip Fry organizes a defence for something that is generally inevitable. That is, under specific conditions common to each period of work, coherence within material possibilities and procedures can be expected. "Puttering" (6) as the decription of the pattern of activity in the early development of a sculpture is so non-specific as to only being

analogous to intuitively generated situations. This phase is followed by the responsive period in which a system of standards is used to coagulate or distil the predominant character of the image. The systems applied are understood as rational and therefore lend themselves to Fry's analysis.

The image is the operational principle the finished work exemplifies. This, I think, provides two options: either the operational principle is the image it generates, ie. the tied knot; or the image illustrates the operational principle, ie. level. The concept doesn't leave open the option of applying the principle as an abstract. In most general construction, which is an expressed interest of Saxe, the evidence of the operational principle either exists, validating the concept, or it is not available visually or conceptually in the realized product. Leeway to interpret the principle is a way of agrandizing the image by denying it functional application.

In Fry, methods of exploration tend to be emphasized disproportionately to either the avenues or results of investigation - an investigation which is generated in response to the material offerings.

A statement by Saxe published in the April 8, 1973 Ateliers, began with "The development in my latest work is the result of reacting contrarily to an earlier series of work." In numerous articles this statement is used to establish a context, separate from his previous work, for examination of his more recent production. Rather than looking at his work in total, many chose to restrict their understanding to a truncated selection of work. Saxe's explanation at that time, was in response to the formal assemblage and structural continuity established through his use of multiple identical units. His more recent work, for

example Sight-Site, 1973-76, which elicits responses to factual conditions of the site, can be understood as the development of the direct way his work of the mid to late 60's necessitated specific installation conditions.

His early sculptural work came directly out of the fracturing of both the surface and the rectangular integrity of his paintings and collages. The paintings no longer spatially contained, extended visually beyond their actual boundaries. The actual spatial definition within these works precipitated the move from wall as support to the floor. The transition, however, was not immediate, the work from this period developing as a bridge to facilitate the passage.

Pieces like Thisaway, 1966, relied on the relationship between the floor and the wall. The sculpture received support from both. The one to one interaction between viewer and sculpture was denied through the imbalance between their sources of support. These spatial bridges depended upon the environment to provide the context for their existence. This early work did not structurally facilitate empathy to the environment. They possessed a quality of being inserted into the space, any standard space that met their conditions. This can be illustrated more directly by pointing out their obvious static, non-flexible ridge fabrication.

Later work which Saxe referred to as "foldies" (7), relied on the unit to unit relationship to generate the final form of the whole. These works introduced actual flexibility but only two dimensional flexibility. The parts can be expanded or contracted but they are always in constant linear alignment. Works like 50 Flex, 1968, or Small Flex Piece, 1968-69, are the most obvious examples of the hinged standard unit multiplied.

These pieces begin to introduce arbitrariness as an element of the final formal resolution. The integrity of the sculpture could accomodate any

number of units. The possibility for extension facillitated a de-emphasis of the singular object quality that the static structures contained.

The "paperclip pieces" with their total three-dimensional flexibility introduced potential chaos. The works had a suppleness that drew attention to the character of the support surface be it rigid gallery carpet or walls, or a grassy clearing. These works were responsive in any direction. The responses were temporary, and to a large extent, non-duplicatable.

The difference between the work that Saxe called "earlier series" and his more recent production is in the character of responses to environments. The early works being actual responses and the newer works, records of responses. The formal resolution of later works depends upon the stored information from original locations or activities.

Where the paperclip pieces could only respond via mimicry, Sight-Site becomes a reference work, containing factual eveidence, analytical information, of the influences to its form. The instrument series contains the idea of sculpture as a direct index of both procedural and material effects. These pieces can be understood as accumulated facts.

An analysis of the compiled objects up to 1971 reveal progressions of spatial exploration. The initial sculptural work follows directly out of the fracturing that began in the painting and collages. Internal relationships generated the final shape. In the sculpture the parts were responsible for the whole.

Saxe's works have always been explorations. In the 60's and early 70's the pieces responded to or were in some way dependent upon the environment they were presented in. Later his works became images or distillations of exploring, primarily, part to part balancing. The viewer could extrapolate

actual environmental or locational information from the earlier works. In the later works the viewer was not party to the actual exploration but was merely presented with the results.

You may wonder to what degree the works are generated to satisfy the needs for presentation of specific information. Works like Three Point Landing, 1971-72, later retitled Wedge, provide a forum to present the intimacies of the hand facture of the constituent elements. These methods of fabrication support a break with the previous work. They reintroduce the subjectively explored construction attitudes of the drawings and collages of 1961 with their overt concern for surface.

From 1971 onwards, parody, both of material properties and within the operations that constitutes the work, contributes a unity to his assemblages of non-similar units and materials. Parody can be found operating in the way one material is assembled according to the structural requirements of another. (8) Parody also functions on a formal level providing coherent dialogue between the parts.

Procedures in these situations become images, which is different from structural procedures operating throughout the piece. Procedures used as images, closely record actual facture, but are actually generated to provide surface continuity between the elements, heightening the dynamic balance provided via formal associations.

Saxe's recent work can be generalized into three groups: the most recent instrument series; Wedge and Windup; and the initial group consisting of a variety of levels and leveled images. All of these works use found or chosen componants. Fry sees them as directly related to the potential of the studio environment and its restrictions. However, all of these works require the introduction of something additional to the material

considerations. Some external concept is illustrated through the works. The production can be thought of as more or less built to specification. The additional orchestration of the piece is usually facilitated by the introduction of a concept of functioning equipment, or a parody of actual work.

What constitutes illustration in his work needs clarification before you can delineate between a functioning device and a device conceived to illustrate a function. Looking at the photo collage Absolutely Level Table, 1971, you get an understanding of the procedural requirements of leveling. It functions, with some validity, as a record of an analytical procedure void of the overtones of illustration it would have if manifested in 3-D.

Sameness of elements exists early in Saxe's corpus. Unit to unit contrasts were supported by colouration which could generate directional readings. In Thisaway the proportions of blue and yellow change on every element creating directional progressions. The malleable structure of the hinged pieces introduced actual part to part contrasts. The paperclip pieces worked in an endless continuation of theme and variation. The elements were uniform and intimated a non-static structure only realized through variation.

The rational ordering in works like Seaplex, 1970, only implies potential chaos. The system will not allow actual chaos to violate its integrity as a whole.

The "levels" images rely on another ordering that must be maintained. The elements are critically placed, imbalance will dissolve the work literally into chaos. The specific nature or single view of these works incorporates chaos as a dynamic, threatening quality, contrasting the static image. Contrasts are used to activate the illustrations. Contradiction is

too bold to be supported in situations of illustration.

In Level, 1972, you can perceive an intuitive interpretation of a leveled image. The matter of factness of the Absolutely Level Table is replaced by dynamics of facture and presentation. The richness of the photo collage's straightforwardness is clouded in Level. Composition within the image reasons control over the accomplishments of the work. In Level, the illustrative quality operates to remove any associations with honest endeavour or required activity.

I feel illustration is of particular significance in the work of Henry Saxe. Most of the critical writing has emphasized his relationship and his work's relationship to an inventory of means, particlarly Philip Fry who emphasizes the physical limits the studio environment effects on the production.

There are some very real differences between Saxe's consideration of what is necessary "to create the image, to illustrate the concept" (9), and accepting fabrication principles which generate the final form through their application. In both use and construction, as demonstrated by an earlier work like Windup, 1973, formal composition orchestrated the assemblage. In the instrument series, which Saxe considers as equipment-like devices, the functional verification is still subject to illustrative concerns. An understanding of fabrication principles can never totally describe the pieces without the introduction of intuitive interpretations.

Materials, inventory of means, and workspace, are all conditions which affect the production. Unity in the work of the entire corpus is a function of contrasts exhibited through variation and repetition. The images can be considered as results of a resolved contrast. Variation will remain as the core, not material or procedural concerns, which seem

to be necessary to illustrate the variation.

The more recent work is much more illustrative in that each piece exemplifies a single theme. Usually it's an exploration of equipment or the function of equipment interpreted intuitively. The variation, always kept in check, is primarily graphic and doesn't contradict the thematic unit.

Methods of fabrication between the paperclip pieces and the work following Weeve shift. The preceeding work by its uniformity, provided possibilities for extension of the image by introducing part to part echoing. Object associations with part or whole dissolve with the possibilities for limitless extension. The work produced after Weeve developed a surface intricacy and intimacy common with subjective exploration. This is unlike the early work which was more empirical and objective in its explorations. It is logical to conclude that an implication of extension will be exploration. Conversely, extension is one system of spatial exploration. The echo of units allows the system to extend, but the form of the extended structure would always be determined by the interaction of the units and the supporting surface.

In Level, Windup, and Over and Under, the evidence of facture, hand facture of common quality, gives the works a self-conscious obviousness. The object's construction is self-evident. Saxe's use of fabricational evidence as graphic signs contains a romanticness that removes the object from use or function in real work. The marks contain the object as a constructed image of functional devices.

The combined perceptions of the associative material contain considerable amounts of subjective inference. One such inference "Latent violence... barely contained" (10) referred to his earlier drawings. This is corroborated with in reference to his sculpture of 1973 as precarious,

rusty metal, hanging ropes, all considered affronts to personal safety.(11) Even in Sight-Site a jagged plate of steel is supported at the viewer's eye level. There is a certain romance to these interpretations but the common factor reveals in the work qualities of self-assertion, intrusion, and brusqueness. Rather than being definitions or indexes which are requested and consulted when required, the rigorous facture generates a very positive presence.

The concept of a unified whole can be located in all his works. Contrasts resolved seem to produce a serenity no matter how disseperate the particulars are. Unity is referred to in almost all the articles. Visual connections, linked units, etc., all refer to a singular image, a whole.

Recurrence has always been present in the works. It appears in an obvious manner in the early works, while in more recent work it can be seen in the formal orchestration. It is also an element that binds the divergent materials. Two materials with opposing properties, rigidness and suppleness, are used in the same piece. Through mimicry they intensify both the unity of the whole and the distinctiveness of themselves. Within each piece recurrence becomes the most pronounced phenomenon. Recurrence does not imply the degree of exactness that repetition requires.

Fry's analysis requests from the reader/viewer too great a degree of trust when considering artistic intentions, to sustain validity. As a concept to be used for further analysis of other works by Saxe it proved to be ineffective. In Wedge which was produced after Weeve (which Fry considers the first example of a finished work generated through puttering) a formal construct was applied to bring the various activities into cohesion. That construct was three-pointedness. This further exemplifies

the idea of works built to specification.

The associative material produces alternative ways to consider the specifications which operate within any one work. Philip Fry offers only a partial explanation of these specifications. The understanding one gets from the associative material is a clearer understanding of what Saxe means by "formal sculptural concerns".(12) From the associative material one can ascertain an understanding of the images in Saxe's work - images that are more than exemplifications of applied standards of production.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Philip Fry, "Introduction," Henry Saxe/"Two Works" (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1977),n.p.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Philip Fry, "Henry Saxe in Conversation/(about the Instrument Series)," Parachute, no.3 (1976),p.6.

[4]Philip Fry, Henry Saxe/"Two Works" (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1977),n.p.

[5]Philip Fry, "Henry Saxe in Conversation/(about the Instrument Series)," Parachute, no.3 (1976),p.6.

[6]Philip Fry, "Procedures," Henry Saxe/"Two Works" (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1977),n.p.

[7]Robin Neesham, "Art(of Henry Saxe)," The Canadian Architect, 13,no.9 (1968),p.10.

[8]Brydon Smith, untitled text in the exhibition catalogue Boucherville, Montreal, Toronto, London.(Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada,1973),p.79-81.

[9]Philip Fry, "Henry Saxe in Conversation/(about the Instrument Series)," Parachute, no.3 (1976),p.6.

[10]Henry Lehmann, "A Vintage Show," The Montreal Star, 11 March 1977. p. D-4.

[11]Roald Nasgaard, "Boucherville/Montreal/Toronto/London/1973," Artscanada, 30,no.4 (1973),p.82-85.

[12]Philip Fry, "Henry Saxe in Conversation/(about the Instrument Series)," Parachute, no.3 (1976),p.6.

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