

ON ENGLISH SCULPTURE

No determinant contribution to the development of the historical avant-garde bears the label made in England (Vorticism is of little account). But in the 60s came a vision of the world from « swinging London ». Moreover, British developments in architecture have been fundamental; and the capacity to go back to existing culture to explore its analysis more deeply is British too. This is particularly true in the case of the story of contemporary British sculpture.

The Primary Sculpture exhibition organized in 1966 at the Jewish Museum in New York provided some useful indications of a trend in contemporary art which went beyond the « structures » shown and the myth of unity in the arts. The myths of « aerodynamic » modernism cherished by the Futurists and Brancusi's expounders were back after half a century, in a revised and corrected edition, after revolutionary (Soviet) and reformist (Bauhaus) Constructivism had lost its battle, remaining a plain cipher or sense barely capable of beautifying a sculpture of statuary origin. In the 60s the new American (Judd, Kelly, Morris, Smith) and British (Caro) sculpture, together with the still « pictorial » constructions by the Italian Lo Savio, had revived some of the typologies originally created by Constructivism. But they did this by distorting them and removing them from their context, as suggested by the pop imagery. The « outsize » enlargements in paintings by Lichtenstein, Johns and Rosenquist led to the « out of scale » dimensions of Morris and Judd. The shrill colours used by the *popists* were translated into the chromatic — heraldic — exaltation of primary structures, for the subtle « banality » of which the fathers of American geometrical abstraction such as Newman, were responsible.

In the big, noisy fairground of Minimal Art, the Americans took the lion's

share, although British sculptors did also play an important part in establishing this new trend. It is true that its theoretic framework came precisely from the United States, and that the tradition of British art had different roots from those of the American tradition. In both « schools », art welcomed suggestions from architecture, though with different results. The constructivist formalism which constitutes the base of primary structures, led, in the United States, to Kahn's frigid « archeological » recoveries and to the re-reading of Rationalism « *in vitro* » by the Five Architects group, whilst in Great Britain it moved through the fundamental phase of *Brutalism* (with traces in Caro) and flowed out into Stirling's spectacular exercises in a Mannerist-Baroque style.

Whilst the new American sculpture originated from the same aesthetic of objects on which Pop Art was founded, the new, and more discreet British sculpture underwent the fascination of both the Pop Artists and the constructivists Pasmore and Nicholson, who were not averse to lyricism. In the U.S.A., Morris, Judd, Grosvenor and Tony Smith tended to be anonymous and serial, towards interdisciplinary work within an all-embracing system of art based on structural analogies rather than on linguistic sympathies. Their enigmatic and vaguely metaphysical « monuments » contained the « formative » (German-style) virtues of painting, sculpture and architecture in *précis* form. Less peremptory and spectacular, the British sculptors turned less to the Bauhaus and more to the constructive themes of assemblage of sometimes previously existing elements. I am thinking of Caro's assemblages of beams (1960-62), arranged as an organism, which are indeed organic and not technological like the Americans' structures — and this is odd, seeing that the founder of these « metal-welders » was the Ame-

rican David Smith. The sculptures by William Tucker and John Painting are organic, too, even when they look clearly geometrical. The same may be said of Tim Scott, whose recent works are articulated like writing; while William Turnbull carries on his tireless experimentation with a rigorous inner logic that gives him a « touch of class ».

Without wishing to sound over-scholarly, it seems to me that the organic approach (free syntactic articulation of the elements of a structure) taken by British sculptors reveals the specific influence of architecture in Britain. Otherwise there is no explanation to the great difference between them and the American structuralists and to the fact that the former tend towards expansion whilst the latter (apart from the outsider Mark Di Suvero) are closed in blocks. Bruno Zevi, in a famous book in which he compares English Gothic architecture with that of France and Italy, writes: « English Gothic architecture... shows an absolutely modern quality which may be called organic; that of expansion, the possibility of growth, and the articulation of buildings. Whereas Milan Cathedral or Notre-Dame are isolated constructions, the English cathedrals are joined to a series of other buildings; they are extending into them and dominating them... It is the *narrative character* (my italics) of medieval architecture and town planning in which the method of a message continued throughout the centuries, through different people and generations united solely by a profound coherency, of expression, but varied, free and episodic, contrasts with the one-meaning-only pronouncements of classical conceptions... ».

Apart from Zevi's Wright-like mood, it seems to me that his analysis is most apt and enlightening with regard to contemporary British architecture, which in fact fully displays its « narrative » spirit.

Gianni Contessi

Les Levine

I first met Les Levine when we were both in the third grade in school in Dublin, Ireland. Little did I know at that time that some 32 years later I would be asked to write an article on his work. In school he was an ordinary child of no particular talents that I could discern. Now and again one would spot him around the playground with a camera about two feet from someone's eye. I always thought that was just his way of getting attention from people, that there was really no film in the camera. Les was above all things involved in most of the mischief that surrounded the school. It would take little more than a suggestion by someone to get Les involved in raiding the local apple orchard. At other times he could be seen standing in front of our fearsome headmaster arguing the most minute point until the master would say, « Sit down, professor ».

Imagine my surprise then when I was

about 12 years of age when Les brought me to his home and took me to his room where out of a locked closet he handed me a stack of photographs. Each of them was a picture of an eye shot from about two feet away from the subject. I must admit that I was both shocked and surprised, even more so when his father entered the room and Les grabbed the pictures away from me and hid them under the bedcovers. After his father had left, I asked Les why he'd hid the photographs and he said, « My father wouldn't understand. He would just think I'm wasting my time ». I thought this was a peculiar reaction. I didn't understand the photographs myself. They just made me think that inside that happy-go-lucky body, there was a very strange mind. No one in our age group at that time even knew the word « art », never mind understood it.

During our teenage years we drifted apart. Les went to London to study at

the Central School of Arts and Crafts. I think he enrolled in an industrial design course as his parents felt he might be able to get employment in that field. Now that I think back on it he probably had some vague notion at that time that he would like to be an artist, but was afraid to even suggest that possibility to his parents as he knew it would frighten them to death. While he was in school in England he became even more of an iconoclast than he was in Ireland, refusing to do more than the bare minimum required to be allowed to continue his studies. About three years later I met him in the West End of London and over coffee I asked him how school was going. And he told me, « It's no different than before, but I've managed to get through three years of it without picking up a pencil once. The teachers want me to learn how to draw, but they haven't given me a good reason why I should acquire that skill

so I've avoided acquiring it ».

But it didn't seem to matter for shortly after that I picked up a tie clip in a store and on the back of it was stamped « designed by Les Levine ». I wondered how he'd done it, but then I realized that the most interesting thing about Les had always been his ideas. Now holding this tie clip in my hand, I could recall the time we visited a canning factory when we were in school. After 15 minutes of looking at the production line he had figured out how the whole system worked. I also remember many of our friends getting mad at him because he would take their toys apart and put them back together again. Of course while Les was working as a free lance designer he was also taking photographs and from time to time a photograph of his would appear in some of the smaller English fashion magazines.

The next thing I knew he had emigrated to Canada and began taking himself seriously as an artist. He tried his hand at painting and wasn't bad at it, but somehow the medium made him nervous. As soon as he got a paint brush in his hand he would break out into a cold sweat. The muscles around his neck would contract and a terrific bout of coughing would begin.

Most of the time he was working on the canvas would be spent trying to figure out easier ways to make a painting. He told me on one of these occasions, « I have to think about something to keep my mind occupied while I'm working, otherwise I become so nervous that I make a mess of the whole thing ».

Another time he told me, « My ideas are clear. I know what I want to do, but all this physical labor prevents my mind from doing it. I have to find a way to destroy my body so that my mind can get to the experience quicker ». I thought at the time that perhaps he was contemplating suicide, but later I realized that he was defining his perceptual experience. Indeed, his first exhibition in 1962 at the David Mirvish Gallery in Toronto was not painting at all, but was one of the first environmental exhibitions to be seen anywhere. Rather than individual art objects filling the space, the entire space encompassed the viewer as art.

Shortly after that he made a series of plastic molded pieces which he called « Disposable Art ». These were shown in the Fischbach Gallery in New York. There were thousands of them made. They were sold for a few dollars each. Their appearance in New York absolutely appalled the art world at large and earned him the title in the media as *enfant terrible*. Most people at the time felt that Les was out to destroy high art. He simply replied by saying, « An art object is only as valuable as the idea it supports. When it no longer supports an idea it should be discarded ».

One of the aspects of an important artist is the mythic aura that builds around the person. Writers like to write about Les Levine because he's fun to write about. His personality has captured a particularly in-tune faction of journalism, and the result is that dozens of articles have appeared, as many about

Les himself as about his work. Among New York artists this tends to generate a fair amount of envious antagonism. John Perreault wrote for *Art News* at the time: « Mild mannered, soft-spoken Les Levine wearing horn-rimmed glasses, steps into a telephone booth, orders a new plastic dome and almost everyone is infuriated. Les Levine, to some, is a threat to art as we now know it. Les Levine is a science-fiction artist out to destroy Western culture. In the art world this kind of irrational fury and defensiveness is almost always a sure sign that the artist is doing something new, complicated, vital ».

Actually the Disposables more than anything pushed Les Levine into post-object art. He had in fact succeeded in removing the body so that the mind could work more expressly while at the same time becoming the art world's subconscious, constantly pushing up all those ugly little truths that few of us are equipped to contemplate.

In 1967 he did the piece called « Profit Systems » I which consisted merely of the purchase and sale of some stock on the New York Stock Exchange, the profit or loss to be considered a work of art. Again the New York art world rejected the action as anti-art. Later it was considered to be one of the seminal conceptual works by those who had previously rejected it as rubbish.

So Les became a cheerfully cynical parodist and manipulator of systems and media including the social and economic systems of the art world. He has never been a joiner. For the most part he is kept outside of the current movements that change every few years in the art world. He describes himself as a media sculptor. « In my case the media are my materials. I am interested in using media to effect change and understanding of our environment; I want to consider media as a natural resource and to mold media the way others would mold matter. If media changes man then man must change media ».

And Les certainly has used media. He was one of the first artists to take TV seriously and use it as art. His first video tapes were made in 1965, an almost shocking fact considering the art world's recent discovery of video tape as a new medium. During the mid-60's he experimented with environmental live television years before it became the staple of body artists and conceptualists. At that stage he was trying to get across the simple premise that art wasn't connected to objects, but parallel and contradictory channels of perception.

His work in the medium of television has developed both technically and conceptually in recent years to the point where he is identified as one of the major producers and theorists in video art. His recent video tapes herald the end of the experimental stage and display a mature control of the medium which satisfy the promise of his early involvement.

The point is that Les can, and does, go from serious to ironic without missing a beat. Most of his work has about it a little of both and can be very funny and cutting at the same time. A few

years ago he produced a show entitled « 18-Carat Solid Gold Chewing Gum », which was chewing gum he had chewed and had cast in gold. He then displayed it in showcases along with the following message: « Buying Gold Gum may be a way of holding on to your money in this tiny boom year of 1972, which may become known as the last boom year there ever was. If you bought Gold Gum before Nixon devalued the dollar, you'd already have a nice profit. Gold is gold even if it's called by another word. This is the unique built-in feature of Gold Gum. You can be like a Mongol barbarian with a gold bowl in your saddle bag, or an Aztec priest with a gold statue in your temple, or you can take it with you like an Egyptian pharaoh. Record companies make a gold record when a plastic platter has sold a million or more. Alchemists who knew what they were doing turned lead into gold. And Les Levine has turned chewing gum into gold. Les says of his golden jubilee, "The medium is the message means talk is cheap, but wiskey costs money" ». In retrospect his predictions about world economy have turned out to be exactly right.

Les has been a compulsive trail blazer. He has consistently dealt with new ideas in art and has endeavored to carry them to their logical or illogical and interesting or trivial extremes. Indeed in such fields as environmental, conceptual, narrative and video art, he has been frequently ahead of the pack.

Being a protean idea man, he has created several of the terms we now associate with contemporary art. The terms « software » and « information » were introduced by Les in the mid-60's in his exhibition « Systems Burnoff x Residual Software ». At the time the art world thought it was a peculiar kind of earth art, but later with the Information Show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York they knew better. More recently, he coined the term « camera art » to define the new area of artists' involvement with photographs.

Les told me a short time ago, « Advanced art now reads out as social software: knowledge and perceptions that understand and refer to realities in the environment that make us behave the way we do. It is the artist's job to show us the shape of what we've got and how it works. Art is not life and life is not art, but good art always exposes something about life, and if art tells us nothing about life then what the hell are human beings doing wasting their time with art anyway? ».

Les is a steady source of written works and contemporary art theory. He has his own corporation, The Museum of Mott Art, Inc., a conceptual museum which issues catalogs offering services for a fee. These services include helping artists cure themselves of the urge to create. Les says, « Creativity is the most negative aspect of art because the creative process is not to create anything, but to allow what is happening to be absorbed by you in such a way that you can clarify it: so that when you are making it clear, people might say that what you have done is creative ».

He has always been accused of being anti-art to which he replies, « Every-

thing in life that is art or is about art is right and moral. Everything that is not art is wrong and therefore immoral. The only thing you can trust anymore is art. I believe in art, but I do not believe in the art world ».

In recent years, Les has become more critically astute in his use of media. In 1971 he went back to Northern Ireland to make a total documentary of the civil war in progress. I think the month and a half spent in Ireland and the many personal communications with the Irish people altered Les' feelings about art and society and to a large degree helped him focus the techniques he developed about art world politics into the politics of society at large.

As a matter of fact I can remember a heated argument I had with him about politics a year before. We were discussing the idea of artists signing political petitions and Les got very upset. He said to me, « I'm fed up with people signing petitions all over the place and taking political stances while at the same time making paintings and sculptures in their studios that have no political content whatsoever, but in the long run their work supports the very systems they're signing petitions against ». He also told me when he had made his video tape BUM in 1965 the art world thought it was very poetic and beautiful. Les said: « I couldn't understand how they could think the misfortune and absolute poverty of the Bowery derelicts could be beautiful or esthetic, but then I realized everything in the art world is just style ». The signing of petitions has done nothing to help the situations the petitions were signed against, but it does help people in the art world to project a style of being personally involved and politically conscious while at the same time going about their business as usual. He also told me at that time, almost in a rage, « Look, Mulberry, I'm tired of these petition signers. It costs you nothing to sign one of these pieces of paper. I want to get completely involved as much as I can in issues that are important to me and incorporate them in my work ».

In his three-month exhibition of « The Troubles » at the Finch College Museum of Art we have the finest of documentary video tapes, photographs, environments and artifacts ever assembled by any artist on a single social

question: the division of the Irish Free State, his birthplace and mine. At the time Les said to me, « I have the feeling the stranglehold of formalism is over. We are now going to be allowed to deal with those things that cause the most real pressures in our lives. If the artist is to survive the 1970's, he is going to have to be willing to give the public some genuine openness about his personal feelings ».

His most recent show in Manhattan last year entitled « The Les Levine Group Show » is Les at his most nervy and vulnerable self. The exhibition consisted of 10 different works in 10 different styles, some about art politics, others about the way politicians use media to control society. But the main point was « Les Levine has no Style ». This art is about freedom, the freedom to sprawl all over the place and to breach the boundaries of art movements which in the long run are merely connected to art commerce. What Les may be saying is, « I don't fit in and I don't want to fit in. I want to be free to deal with those things that genuinely move me as an individual ». Obviously what he is also saying is that you are free, too. The only thing stopping you doing what you want to do is an art system which tells you you must fit in, no different than the large automobile corporation which says you must merely put doors on automobiles all day long.

If a single epitaph could be written over the entrances to Les' exhibitions it should read: « You are the art » meaning whatever happens in this space you the viewer are fundamentally responsible for it. Les has simply supplied the props for tripping various neutral mechanisms anyone supplies. In other words he's thrusting the burden for proving artistry back onto your shoulders. This is not an abnegation of responsibility on his part so much as it is an attempt to alert art seekers to what is central to post-formalist esthetics: namely, the art experience may be derived from virtually any situation. It is the contextual juxtaposition within the viewer's mind that ultimately frames or defines the artistic equation.

What the audience expects from the artist is that he becomes some heroic figure that they can look up to, but in the long run Les has resisted that heroic position. His position has been « I am no better than you are. I'm

just as fucked up as you are. I can't see any better than you can. It is a condition of being alive, the relationship of the artist and whoever. The state of dissatisfaction is a universal state for both the artist and the audience, only it's the artist who's pointing it out. The artist has to respond to the underlying cultural anxiety of our society and somehow he also has to shed light on that anxiety. Art cannot be a way of escaping reality ».

As I think back to some of the earlier things Les has told me, at the time many of them seemed to be taking some form of screwball scholarship or pedagogy and at times some felt like affronts or impositions. I know now what he meant when he said, « I have to find a way to destroy my body so that my mind can get to the experience quicker ». What he meant was that in a world of media and post-industrial soft machines, the body for all intents and purposes has ceased to be able to function in coordination with the mind. Media, because it can be directly transmitted into the mind, is by nature more pervasive than anything that has to be negotiated by the body.

Even though I've known Les for many years, it is difficult to predict in what direction he will move next. His work constantly surprises even those who are close to him. At times he seems like a man possessed with a single-minded vision, but as soon as his ideas gain acceptance he moves almost in the exact opposite direction as if to say acceptance is the lowest form of flattery, the way society corrals the energies of important ideas and renders them impotent for purposes of fitting them into their system. It is obvious to me now that there is a lot more to Les than has ever met the eye. The density of experience over the years is far too complicated to be explained in one article, but one thing is clear to me now and that is: whatever the struggle an artist has to take on in his life, Les has always been willing to pay the price. He is still looking at us directly in the eyes from two feet away.

Mulberry Baxter

Mulberry Baxter is an American sociological writer and artist. He was born in Dublin in 1935. He has known Les Levine most of his life. Mulberry Baxter is presently employed as information officer of The Museum of Mott Art, Inc.

Carla Accardi

By « feminine sign » in art I do not intend a group of archetypal visual signals, in an iconographical sense, but instead these signs as *symptoms* of a certain feminine existential *valence*. This valence can also polarize and renew existing iconographical signs and creative processes. With regard to Carla Accardi, I would like to verify her particular experience of the symbolizing faculty on nuclei of life that have been preserved intact and unexpressed be-

cause of woman's historical position as cast-off, and her use of these new spaces, real and fantastic, rational and unconscious. Rather than in the representation of the feminine, I am interested in the meaningful *trace* that emerges from a different experience both of the imaginary and the real.

At the beginning, Accardi's expression is tied to the experience of the Abstractism. At times she calls this tie « my impediment » and at others « vi-

gour ». I would call it the painfulness and the rigour of her initial path: her art reveals drastically the variety of experience (not in the sense of individuality) that can be hidden behind languages that are apparently similar (in this case, *Art Autre* of the Fifties). I am reminded of a statement by the painter Judy Chicago: « Noland and I have totally different relationships with the circular forms that are recurrent both in his paintings and in mine ».