

INTERVIEW

Pierre-Yves Desaive & John Isaacs

PYD What do you think about writing about art as a way to communicate?

JJ WRITING about art is fine so long as it's not really about art, that the words are not an attempt to define art, to categorise it. I find that writing about what I do is informative, and helps me to see the work as something more than an unconscious knee jerk, but it's never really in very descriptive terms that I put the words down. I think the best way into it is like writing a love letter, the writer and the reader already know the physical state, but it's the emotional connection that is the key, this feeling that words can also betray the wrong sentiment, that one sentence mutually excludes another. I also see this open handed approach as being much more akin to the act of interpretation. I am fascinated by the very idea that one thing can intentionally mean the same thing to someone else. That one life is so parallel in its evolution that meaning is shared. Language is not a definition but an exercise in proximity, relativity, so in that sense 'conceptually' flawed to be misinterpreted. Writing about art is like making art, as it is essentially a leap of faith in the first place. Letters are symbols, we are reminded of that when we look at other languages like Chinese or Arabic, as we see them as incoherent images, rather than a language, images that we know must mean something if only we had the knowledge to understand them.

Art is equally full of this sense that we can understand it if we have the right tools. Ironically artists probably don't fully understand exactly what motivates them, or why they make certain decisions, so if that is the case how can the viewer be expected to correctly interpret them. So yes in the end writing about art, just like making art is a perfectly flawed way to communicate, and like art, when it's good, it communicates the proximity of one person to another.

PYD That is exactly it. Even though I find it a bit presumptuous, I can't help but think that, when I write about a work of art, I am somehow making art, in the sense that I try to communicate a feeling, an impression, to the reader. I also put lots of personal things in my writings on art, and I try to make it easier for the viewer to feel, more than to understand, what the artwork is about. They say (and I say) that many art writers are failed artists, but there is a huge difference. The writer does not take the same risk that the artist does. He does not have to face the judgment of the audience. Do you get the feeling you take a risk when you produce a piece, and present it to the viewers?

JJ THERE is always a risk, this is what keeps the work alive, but I feel that it's intrinsic to the works origin, not the point of exposure. Whether or not I trust in my own need to create it, and much less about the works final acceptance.

Laurence Olivier said that if he would stop feeling nervous before going on stage then he would stop being a good actor. He was not nervous because he had stage fright, but because he was excited to create and the chance of doing it well or failing. In other words complacency is death to art, to any kind of human creativity. The studio is then the stage, the artist is an actor performing to an imaginary audience.

Writers and artists tend to create their works in isolation, working in an imagined communication with an imagined reader or viewer. The studio is the platform, like the writers desk, only as a writer all you need is a pen and paper but as an artist you need to accumulate so much physical raw material before even starting to produce something. The risk of failure is greater simply because the volume of physical matter is greater – the initial investment. Standing in the studio, knee deep in mess and material, is a different experience to the cerebral act of writing, where the possibility exists, if needed, to conjure up an immense structure, in a matter of sentences, but, it is the very material quality of making an art work which separates it from language, from writing.

An artwork exists beyond words, so ultimately it starts from a completely different place, once I understood this, that the intuition is the thing to trust, the feeling of risk diminished.

That doesn't mean that the act of creation gets easier, but that's more a problem of inspiration, the initial momentum to get started, once the ball starts rolling the magic happens. The act of making is the act of understanding the motivation, during the process some works just don't make it to the end. Of course I am often anxious at exhibition openings, when the work meets the viewer, but more for myself than the work, as though my presence is a distraction, an act of infidelity to the contract.

In the end, if it is good, the work belongs to the viewer, they have their own relationship, and I'm no longer needed.

PYD I like it when you say, "The studio is the platform, like the writers desk, only as a writer all you need is a pen and paper but as an artist you need to accumulate so much material before even starting to produce something". Actually, I cannot imagine my work as an art writer – if this word even makes sense – without also having a lot of accumulated material to put into it. As I said, I put a lot of personal stuff into what I write, and I guess it is the only way to write something that is honest. Years go by and my stock gets bigger every year, the stock where I am looking for intuition, ideas, feelings. I guess this is how you proceed, too. And this could be the reason why you use the same titles for different artworks: what counts is what lies behind. Am I right?

Jl It feels like the work as a whole is indeed one body, and that the recent work is not simply new, but somehow filling in the gaps, completing the anatomy of the structure as a whole. That's often how it feels, as though works are felt, are present but not yet visible, though of course it's not so self determined and the possibilities are endless. The diversity of my work is linked to a total aversion of repetition, of course I have to revisit certain materials and forms, but I tend to work through techniques like an autodidact, learning by doing. People seem to think that artists have some kind of master plan, that they are following an inner knowledge in the quest for some kind of perfection, working towards an ultimate goal, however the reality for me is that there is never really such a moment. However some pieces certainly feel more complete than others, some more autonomous. The titles I give to works are not necessarily about the specific piece, but about an approach to it, and sometimes seemingly disparate pieces hit a similar note, they can be from a completely different medium but they are sitting in the same emotional landscape.

My work is a form of exploration, an exploration of the language at hand. I rarely have assistants, and make pretty much everything myself, like a form of survival, even some of the tools I use to model the sculptures are home made, as though self sufficiency is akin to independence.

Using the same titles for different works often feels like the trail of bread left in the forest in the Hansel and Gretel story, as though the titles link the pieces together, create a tangible route to follow through time, a flow chart of my thought processes, and find a larger way to understanding, a way for the viewer to see the larger landscape. As in your second description of the word Archipelago, as a group or scattering of similar things, the titles connect the works thorough time and space.

PYD And with repetition comes boredom. There is one thing that is certain about your exhibitions, they are never boring, yet sticking to a style, in the broad sense of the term, also helps to give one's art production

a sort of identity. David Byrne once said – If you always wear the same outfit, people will remember you better. How would you define your connection to “style”? Is there a John Isaacs style?

JJ FUNNY you mention David Byrne as an example, because he’s right, people will remember the outfit, but remembering him wobbling in that huge suit on stage is also to fix him with the one identity.

David Bowie is closer to my idea of creativity in the spotlight, being able to make a big statement, define something and then simply walk into a completely other guise whenever he felt like it, to trust in his ability to recreate who he was, without losing the essence, but I’m not a pop star, no one is really looking at me that hard, I don’t dance in a spotlight, and I still have nothing to lose by not having a style – there is simply not enough invested in me to create that kind of pressure, and honestly that’s exactly how I like it.

I don’t really have a ‘style’, but maybe that in itself becomes one, of course over the years I might have cornered the market in terms of fat man sculptures, but in the end that’s my ridiculously oversized David Byrne suit, and is equally unrepresentative. If there is a style then maybe it’s simply that if no one can recognise it as being done by any other artist, then it might be me.