

THE EMPOWERMENT OF IMAGINATION

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In this article, glass artists are themselves held up to the light. The artist's profession is (still) free and unprotected. Artists do not need to have received an academic education or to hold a degree. An artist may consider himself to be producing a work of art, but its quality as such remains to be decided and confirmed by authorities in that field. If real art is to be distinguished from the work of amateurs, the world of art needs experts who are qualified to appreciate real quality and who can determine what is valuable, what deserves to be revealed to the public and what should be preserved for posterity. As to whether their judgments will be vindicated, only time will tell. It is difficult, however, to bridge the yawning chasm separating the expert from the layman, illiterate as many artists are when it comes to the language of imagery.

Glass art and glass artists need a way of thinking in which the creation of form and the infusion of purpose (FORM AND CONTENT) are each given a clear place and are open to discussion. Now we have reshaped nature and can shape all culture goods we want, it is about time we chose what to keep and what can go into the old glass container. If glass art is to be treated as an adult phenomenon, glass artists must themselves first behave in a grown-up way, taking responsibility for what they produce.

The numerous bad and senseless glass objects flooding and polluting the market are helping to fuel a creeping inflation as a result of which glass art is rapidly degenerating into something not unlike the position of a patient whose strange illness may not be mentioned in his presence. Only by calling a spade a spade can his pain and suffering be properly discussed. Glass art belongs like the art of glass at the primacy of art, visual art, and autonomous art as architecture, design and crafts do.

What is art in my opinion?

Edgar de Bruyne once said: "In the purest works of art, art forces us to mourn about the dream from which it is born. Because she provides us what she promised, art will stay forever the seed for spiritual life."

It is very easy to indicate what glass artists should themselves do to cure many glass illnesses, since they are the ones who produce the artefacts in the first place. Whether they are capable of doing that is another matter. Perhaps it would be better to introduce that change at the stage of art education. But in order to make the distinction clear, I propose here to describe what art is not in dividing the subject up under the headings Content without Form and Form without Content.

"The greatest threat to art is to be found in a loss of content and necessity": Bart Lootsma in Somebody's Gotta Die

CONTENT WITHOUT FORM

Art is not a form of therapy:

Many glass artists seek to keep themselves almost therapeutically busy by working with glass. But in so doing, an artist cannot rid himself of his traumas, his personal sufferings and frustrations. It is pointless to seek a cure for such ills by keeping oneself 'nice and busy'; such a cure is only to be found in the sphere of medicine. The observer of a work of art should not be burdened with the artist's private problems; there is already quite enough 'problem art' as it is. The private vision of an artist must be primarily discernible in the plastic arts themselves. Artists should concern themselves with their personal visions of the universal things which preoccupy 'humanity' in general. It is their task to anticipate those things. The former classification of the arts within the sphere of Education & Science provided a clearer picture than the modern trend towards categorizing them within the domain of Culture, Welfare and Social work. In carrying out their researches, educators and scientists also anticipate developments in society: they expose and reveal things, pointing out areas of friction and omissions and placing their finger on sore points. They give a sense of direction to the developments which you and I follow as laymen.

Art is not conservative:

A great void in glass art is caused by those glass artists who continue incessantly to engage in the contemplation of their navels and just stand and stare at each 'turd' which they excrete – artists who simply rub their stomachs contentedly at the production of the latest in an endless series of versions of the same work, or who just plough on with the latest of numerous experiments, creating their latest manifestation of free expression, the latest display of their highly personal, emotional rubbish. Artists, that is to say, who don't want anything to change. Yet art must be progressive. It must develop; it must break new ground and keep moving forward. Otherwise, the production of art is reduced to nothing more than a trick. Through his work, an artist must make a statement; otherwise, he isn't saying anything. An artist must be rigorous in what he does, because, as the saying goes: "If anything is possible, nothing is." Harry Boom (1945-1995) said, in which case, he will become a mere juggler or acrobat.

"The mere act of wrestling with limits and boundaries provides inspiration for the artistic genius. Rules can be broken; inspiration can be drawn from old rules from some distant past, but you can also make up your own rules. However, the condition of this is that you must be really in control": Maarten Doorman in his synopsis Grensvervaging in de kunst, Bulletin 7, Fonds BKVB

Art is not 'nice':

"Kill your darlings" is one of the most difficult and painful concepts which an artist has to apply in his design process. To remain true to one's art is difficult, because every glass object ultimately has something nice about it. An artist must possess the courage to throw out his own junk; he must be strict with himself, and apply himself seriously to building up his collection of works. If he himself does not truly know his own work, how can anyone else be expected to do so? He must develop powers of self-criticism and learn to put up with the criticisms levelled by others by being stricter with himself and by reading himself the riot act more often. After all, desperate ills call for desperate remedies. Since every artist is

convinced that what he produces is art, art itself is dependent on art criticism. Students learn that such criticism is directed not at them personally, as human beings, but at their work. By continually discussing their work, and by refraining from offering cut-and-dried solutions and models (based on the teacher's knowledge and experience) and, instead, constantly asking new questions (by way of investigation and renewal), they learn what it is that they themselves think of their own work and that of others. They learn how they should react to criticism: whether to dismiss it, to soldier on with the lessons learned by them from their teachers, or to develop a vision of their own. In that way, they learn how to instil a sense of direction into the processes that they use and how to practice the artist's profession. Seen from this point of view (*don't kill the messenger*), is it not fair to say that criticism represents, *a priori*, a positive act undertaken out of respect for the person concerned? Is it not the case that the most respectful approach is to give an honest opinion backed up by solid arguments? After all, once he has finished his studies, a student will be on his own and, in order to stand on his own two feet, he will have to be able to apply that critical approach to himself and to the rest of the world.

"To live is to suffer. Solace is nowhere to be found. It does not reside in art, because art brings only momentary redemption": Arthur Schopenhauer in Raging at the World

Art is not beautiful:

The belief that art should be beautiful represents a major misapprehension restraining the development of glass art, another such misconception being the idea that it is possible to debate the nature of beauty and ugliness. Art has nothing to do with beauty or ugliness. Somehow, the concept of what is aesthetic, of what is 'fair' or 'fine' (the term 'fine art', which denotes painting and sculpture, by contrast with 'decorative' or 'applied' arts), has gradually come to be degraded in the mind of the layman, assuming a meaning synonymous with 'beautiful'. How its true significance has been distorted! Furthermore, beauty and ugliness are relative concepts which can only be discussed within their own context. Maybe the form of a work has to be ugly, and the working of its surface has to be repellent, precisely in order to enable it to put its message across. It is perfectly possible for an observer not to like a work of art, to feel no affinity with its style or to be uninterested in the discipline applied in its creation. Or he may be concerned to avoid being confronted with anything which strikes him as unpleasant. But what that tells us relates solely to the attitude of the observer; it reveals nothing about the quality of the work itself. Just as humanity provides examples of beauty and ugliness, it is possible for ugly works of art to possess inherent value. And that is why, in order for us to be able to recognize that quality or value, an artist must himself be ruthlessly explicit. By toiling away at his work, by scraping away and removing whatever is superfluous in it, he renders the statement which he is seeking to make ever stronger, and the end product becomes not more beautiful but simply better. Even to the uninitiated, its message must come across loud and clear. Because once a work of art becomes clear, there is no need for any further analysis or interpretation and it can start to reveal to the person looking at it the story which it is seeking to tell, the history which it aims to relate and the emotions which it is intended to arouse. Remarks such as "but it's rather beautiful" or "but I think it's really interesting" may be made by laymen who like to look at beautiful things. Amongst glass artists, this is a dangerous approach to adopt, and it arises primarily because the material is so 'beautiful' in itself, and the technique used so interesting, that the prostitution of its glamour of gloss and glitter – its attractive external appearance – is

highly seductive. In that regard, once again, it is only a rigorous approach that can provide a cure.

Art is not a matter of technique:

Glass artists are frequently so preoccupied with the technical, organizational and financial problems arising from their work that they lose themselves in matters of ‘manual dexterity’. They want to relate so many stories, but no longer have the time and objectivity to examine their work with a critical eye. They fail to make a clear statement, with the result that their work retains a breathless, unfinished, unpurified quality. Such artists become carried away by questions of technique. In such circumstances, the design frequently becomes ‘evidence’ of the primary idea or concept underlying it. It would have been better if the artist had first been able to formulate a clear idea of what it was that he wanted to create, and had then searched for or developed an appropriate technique with which to give expression to that idea. He might equally as well have wielded a fret-saw, since the first idea which happens to occur to an artist reveals nothing of the final form which his work is to take. Nor is there anything to indicate whether that idea was a good one, or any certainty that the artist will hit upon a good form for his work. Such a free and ‘heretical’ approach to concepts, materials and techniques is hardly appropriate in glass art. After years of toil and investment of effort, it is difficult, for example, ‘simply’ to smash a sheet of glass into pieces solely in order to examine the way in which glass actually breaks. After rediscovering minutely detailed formulas, often kept secret by generations of glass artists, it is extremely difficult to extract something spectacular using, instead of transparent enamel, instead of that secret binding agent, just a whitewash brush, soaked if need be in cow dung. Really difficult techniques, such as the setting of a figure painted in four layers of contour, grisaille and enamel paint, are shifted completely aside, because the newer techniques appear so much more modern. Thus slumping often became a way of avoiding the effort involved in mastering the real art of stained glass painting. An initial attempt at making a bowl quickly results in a clumsy, pancake-like object, but appears – by virtue of the numerous technical problems involved, the hardness of the material and the considerable amount of work required – to possess some validity. “And it must have been jolly difficult to make, too”, the layman may think. And ... what a piece of luck: “Look, you can hang it up to look nice, too ...”. But does it not also require skill and a great deal of work to produce an attractive puzzle consisting of over 5,000 pieces? To be a skilled craftsman is to be a master of one’s art. An artist should exercise mastery over the techniques used by him. He must be able to control them and to allow them free rein. My wise teacher Zwartjes used to say: “It is only once you have learned to play the violin that you may, with one masterly blow, smash it to pieces on stage.”

Art is not a matter of simply collecting recipes:

For want of basic and further professional training in glass design, glass artists scour the world, as if possessed, in search of workshops where recipes for culinary delights and tasty morsels are vouchsafed. The content of such recipes, and the reason why the materials and techniques used in them should have been chosen, are never discussed. Such technical specialisations are good for artists who have completed their studies; they know what they want, and are able to apply their newly acquired knowledge in a mature way, developing it further in their own work. Where, however, people who have had only three days’ training take it upon themselves to train other artists, the snake ends up biting its own tail.

FORM WITHOUT CONTENT

Art is not a matter of producing art:

Just as you cannot simply create a design, it is not possible simply to ‘make’ art either. Art may be the end result of a design process. By looking at it, you can see the design or art inherent in it. The end product is then a logical consequence of the sum total of what an artist stands for. Each artist has his own individual character – his own handwriting, personality and history – which he needs to seek out in order to discover what does not yet exist. And the thing which it may become only reveals itself in the course of the process itself. Glass may well acquire a form as a result of unfamiliarity with such processes; but the story is filled in afterwards. The cry goes up: “It looks rather like a ...” and in order to make it look like real art, the resulting work often ends up being called Untitled.

“The school of thought which proclaims that ‘everything is possible and permissible in the production of art’ is pushed aside by art which knows that it is limited by the need to possess expertise. An artist needs to be able actually to do things, rather than just invent them, he must be a trained, thoughtful expert rather than merely fairly talented. This is not a matter of previous apprenticeship in traditional methods but of real expert skill and intellectual quality”: Henc van Maarseveen in Aangevallen in de Flank

Art is not the mere sum total of the different aspects of an image:

The title of a work may give a fair insight into the message it is seeking to convey. One encounters examples of really muddle-headed efforts at naming works. The title of a work should provide the observer with a means of access to its meaning; it should provoke him, stimulating his interest or prompting his curiosity. Alternatively, a work may be untitled because it has to yield up its content itself. Titles such as Contrast, Equilibrium, Composition or Balance are, in the case of poor-quality works, not merely titles but at the same time their actual intended content. However, the pictorial aspects of a work can never constitute its content, because they are merely facets of the image, dictating the external appearance of a form. Just as the material, techniques and media from which an object is constructed are merely the means by which it is brought into existence, its aspects or their juxtaposition are simply the ‘ingredients’ chosen by the artist in order to make its content visible. Thus they are invariably either present or absent. Titles must have a point to them: obviously, one would not call a child ‘Blood platelet’, a book ‘Dust-Jacket’ or an *haute cuisine* dish simply ‘root vegetable’.

Art is not reality:

Because an ‘image’ is associated with perception (“I have seen it myself!”), it seems to be ‘real’; appears to tell the truth, to resemble objective reality. In art, however, the image is always an abstraction which the artist has consciously chosen to transform in visual terms from so-called reality. Reality or ‘truth’ frequently refuses to lend itself to a simple, clear interpretation, even in a police photo or a hospital scan! In art, the image does not in any way amount to proof of reality. It is a new, invariably subjective form of reality, subject to its own laws. Perception and observation, along with the idea itself, the way in which it is treated, the concept and the technique used, merely contribute individual aspects of the design. And those aspects are at the same level as types of design such as alienation, styling, decoration or construction.

Moreover, the image may not be the same thing as an illustration. An illustration clarifies something which would not have been clear without it: just like a plate in a book or a photo in a brochure. In visual art, the form of the work must elucidate itself; it must not need anything else in order to become still clearer. A third misconception is the idea that art should imitate reality. This gives rise to another serious fault, namely the effects of being totally absorbed, to the exclusion of anything else, in glass and questions of technique. Even where the glass serves no individual function or possesses no particular value in a work, that work still has to be made of glass. Glass can be made into anything. The whole of nature has been transformed into glass; it trendily portrayed running women, houses, boats, frogs, masks, fruit, shoes, hands or wings. Art has nothing to do with the imitation of reality. Such errors, primarily of a 'story-telling' nature (emanating from the overblown narrative style typical of American studio glass), lead to the most impossible solutions, using even more impossible constructions and accessories to hold the work together and keep it upright. If an artist wishes to narrate such long drawn-out tales in a single work, he would do better to write a book.

Art is not imitation:

Art is not an imitation of nature and another serious aspect of the world of art is the phenomenon of imitators and epigones. As a result of their poor training, they have failed to learn even how to pinch ideas properly. They misuse forms created by others in order to conceal their own laziness and emptiness. They have nothing to say.

Art is not mere show:

The situation becomes really serious when design simply appeals to cheap sentiment. Here too, the substantial kitsch content pulls the wool over the layman's eyes. Mawkishness rapidly becomes a sort of glass pornography, and the production of this type of form without content is one of the worst evils which must be laid at the door of glass artists. Provided that a work is large, voluminous and spectacular, those observing it will fall for it in droves. A true artist should not so easily satisfy and commercially exploit the superficial need for wonderment and surprise or the desire for sensation. If he does so, he becomes a mere pimp, prostituting glass and misusing the dazzlingly beautiful yet vacant packaging for the sake of his vulgar trade. Although an artist has to earn his living from his work, art is not a trade or merely a pleasurable diversion; an artist is not engaged in dictating matters of taste or awakening needs. Art must be capable of stirring emotions in an honest way. It must be able to achieve a goal through the senses. It must ask questions, without ever providing answers. Art is not entertainment: if that is you what are after, you should go to Euro Disney or visit Amsterdam's red-light district!

"The problem with freedom is that you do not have to commit yourself. You can make what you want. But how are you to stand out from the advancing throng of amateurs who – their name says it all – simply do what they like doing best?": Karin Voogd in Kunst is Vervuiling Geworden

The glass artist's task – now that all the various disciplines involved in glass design have won their place within its sphere – is to reveal what has never been expressed before, by perceiving it and applying imagination to it. The artist's vocation is to bring form and content

together again. His most intensely personal and unique story, wish or dream can no longer consist of mere vacant chattering or empty packaging. If he can achieve this, a glass artist will be entitled to claim a place for his work in art galleries and museums, and the task of the art galleries and museums (as specialists in glass) will then be the serious selection and preservation of the very best pieces, building up a collection of works which really warrant the time and trouble involved.

Their task must be to provide the layman and professional, in a comprehensible manner, with an insight into the latest developments. Their objective must be to give the ordinary public the 'handles' with which to comprehend all the innovative work it sees.

Because – to end on a positive note – there are also, fortunately, good glass artists. Despite all the problems, they rise to the surface, because their work has lasting value, because it expresses the empowerment of their imagination, because form and content are held together and co-exist in their art, because they are sound and honest and because they are able to swim against the stream. They take the public seriously, by not just sitting on their heels in order to make things easier, in that they are constantly searching for themes which will occupy and preoccupy mankind.

Amongst the themes on which artists are working at the present time are the transformations which are being brought about by the media and technology, commercialization, decontextualization, globalization, *reality-creality*, Relation Art, Shock Art, Fragmentation, Entropy, Gender, Social Design, decomposition and dematerialization ...

Can you keep pace with them?

Can glass artists keep pace with them?

We still have a long way to go ...

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