

SILENT MUSIC & INVISIBLE ART

To Western man, 'silent music' is a contradiction in terms. 'Invisible art' seems equally absurd, something that cannot exist, like the son of a barren woman.

Even inaccessible art, though conceivable, seems somehow wrong, especially if made deliberately inaccessible.

Roberto Matta, the surrealist, once put a painting on the six interior sides of a box, which he then sealed. And Walter de Maria proposed that a great cylinder be buried in a mountain overlooking Munich, its entrance concealed and never revealed.

But Matta found no buyer and de Maria found no backer. Art, we feel, demands viewers and music, listeners.

I heard of an incident in the 1950s when a number of drug patients, many of them jazz-players, were deprived of their instruments as punishment for some minor infraction of hospital rules. They sat about listlessly until a saxophonist picked up his invisible instrument and began to play silently, and soon all the others joined in.

We call this mime, not music. Music is something we hear and share. Yet in many tribal societies, silent music is cultivated, even institutionalized.

Tribal singers sometimes plug both ears, converting sound into inner vibration. Or they may play small musical instruments inside their closed mouths.

In certain musical performances, the underlying beat is the unheard beat – like an orchestra in which nobody plays the tune because everybody hears it. The underlying beat is a motor beat and the music is a dance executed silently while standing still.

Among North American Indians, silent music was the essence of the spirit quest. At puberty a boy went apart from his fellows and fasted for a time in the wilderness. If he was the proper sort, a spirit took pity on him, bestowing special powers, principally in the form of songs. These remained his personal property, never to be revealed to any others, save just before death – and even then, not always.

In days of torment and doubt, he sang to evoke his guardian's help, and he sang again when relief was granted. He also gave thanks by painting or carving images addressed to his guardian. These were hidden in inaccessible places – on

cliff walls facing the sky, or in forbidden caves facing darkness. They were never intended to be seen by the living.

Most were small, but a few – probably clan efforts – were immense, laid out on mountaintops or scraped from desert floors. One is reminded of the tale of the giant so huge he is invisible. From the ground level, nothing can be seen save meaningless lines of rock and earth. Only when seen from the sky do these lines become coherent. Now, from airplanes, we see what was once reserved for the spirits.

In Canada, such earth sculptures are generally ‘geometric’, but along the Mexican-United States border, many are anthropomorphic, often depicting a male-female *in coitus*. Here, as elsewhere in the tribal world, such pairs probably represent the original tribal ancestors in ‘primordial copulation’, the monument thus being the point of origin of the tribe and, by extension, the beginning of the world.

Such pregnant images were far too potent for mortal eyes. So were the contents of medicine bundles. Some medicine bundles were never opened, not even by their owners. Their owners already knew what lay within. They had been entrusted with songs and formulas that now resided in fetishes concealed within these bundles. Any exposure, certainly any public exposure, could only diminish these powers.

Inaccessible Art

We think of communication as the transfer of knowledge from a knower to a not-knower. Such transfer is meaningless in a tribe where all who are entitled to know, already know. Sharing knowledge, it is believed, threatens both its ownership and the very nature of that knowledge.

Even when an object is brought forth publicly, it may be exposed in such a way that it can’t really be seen. Among the Haida Indians, finely detailed rattles become mere blurs when rapidly shaken at crowded, fire-lit ceremonies. And among the Salish, when a spindle whorl is spun, its complex design disappears; when it is not in use, it is hidden away.

We treat art as public property, even as environmental. We display it with maximum clarity, in every possible medium, hoping for the largest possible audience. Our museums boast of crowds who come to see art and who buy reproductions to take home.

American Indians treated art differently. Only a small part of their art was intended for public display. Clan and house objects were collectively owned, of course. But even they were displayed only on appropriate occasions, by

appropriate persons, in appropriate ways, before select audiences. Residents in Indian villages spent their lives surrounded by hidden art: each saw only those treasures and heard only those songs he was entitled to see and hear.

Visions

Art inspired by visions was even less accessible. Private visions remained private. Public exposure diminished their power and made them vulnerable to theft. So they were carefully concealed.

Still, it was always tempting to hint about them. One method was by pictorial shorthand. This produced designs so abstract no stranger could decipher them. Meaning was reserved for owners and when they died, that meaning was forever lost.

Among the Salish, according to Wayne Suttles, "the vision was the unique experience of the individual", a source of skill and status. Its owner kept its exact nature secret, perhaps until old age. But he might hint at it in the winter dance, by word or movement. Any other representation was "vague, ambiguous, covert".

Clearly there were limits on the representation of visions ('guardian spirits'). In native theory, everyone (or every male perhaps) ought to 'train' and have a vision. But it was dangerous to reveal too much about it. If you talked about it, you could 'spoil' it; it might leave you or even make you sick or it could be taken away from you by an enemy shaman. Yet eventually you wanted others to know that you 'had something'. Probably all ethnologists who have worked on the Northwest Coast have heard hints and half-revelations about what people 'have'. Being possessed by a song at the winter dance is, of course evidence that you 'have something' and the words of the song and the movements of the dance may hint at what it is. But it must be tempting to hint in other ways, though dangerous to go too far.

Among some tribes, visions were never concretely represented. Elsewhere they were portrayed, but with restraints. Such prohibitions and restraints affected artistic expression. One effect was a tendency toward images that were essentially in-visible.

When you look outward, you see nature. But when you look inward, you see those invisible forces that underlie nature, including human nature. This is the in-sight of the blind seer. It is also the method of the modern scientist who ignores appearances and concerns himself with the laws governing appearances.

Eskimo artists concerned themselves with both realities. As hunters, they observed nature carefully and when they carved images, they matched reality

with such accuracy, such detail, one can, tell, say, a Common loon from a Red-Throated loon.

But when they depicted the inner world, art became making, not matching, and images became surrealistic, not realistic. As one Netsilik woman said, "We believe that people can lead a life apart from real life."

Knud Rasmussen, the Danish ethnographer, tells of asking Anarqaq, an Eskimo shaman, to draw spirit visions: "... he would sit for hours with closed eyes, solely intent on getting the vision fixed in his mind, and only when this was done would he attempt to put it into form. Sometimes the recollection of the event affected him to such a degree that he trembled all over, and had to give up the attempt."

Anarqaq consented to make these drawings on condition that Rasmussen take them to his own country and not show them about among Anarqaq's people.

Ritual Words

Ritual words were sometimes more important than visions. They could be a source of artistic inspiration, a basis for skill and status, and the power behind certain ceremonies, incantations, rites. The efficacy of ritual paraphernalia, as well as protective designs, often depended upon them. Like visions, they were privately owned by individuals who kept them to themselves.

How do you paint a song or carve a word? One way is to use an acoustic model: make the eye subservient to the ear by patterning space acoustically.

The essential feature of sound is not its location, but that it be, that it fills space. We say, "The night shall be filled with music," just as the air is filled with fragrance; locality is irrelevant. The concert-goer closes his eyes.

Auditory space has no favored focus. It's a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It is not pictorial, boxed-in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment, indifferent to background.

The eye focuses, pinpoints, abstracts, locating each object in physical space, against a background. The ear, however, favors sound from any direction.

Alaskan Eskimo masks were like dissected Mirós, reassembled in three dimensions. Imagine a Calder mobile with Miró forms and figures. No borders freeze or imprison. Instead, each Eskimo mobile, obedient to an inner impulse, creates its own dimensions, asserts its own identity, unhampered by external restraints.

Is there a better way for the eye to borrow from the ear? Is there a better way to hint at the nature of a song without revealing its words or notes?

These Eskimo masks were used once, then destroyed.

Evanescent Art

Japanese and Tibetan Buddhism are full of esoteric paintings and images not supposed to be seen. Certain Buddhist mandalas must be destroyed almost as soon as they are completed. In the Japanese secular art of *bonseki*, the artist is required to destroy his sand-paintings after about two weeks.

Navaho sand-paintings qualify as “sand mandalas” with the same requirements. Sand-paintings, generally, in many parts of the world, are erased as a final step in their production, and chants associated with them are kept equally secret.

Rituals and sacred dances are, in themselves, impermanent art forms. Often the paraphernalia produced for them is destroyed at the close of these performances. This custom is so widespread as to suggest great antiquity.

We call painters and musicians ‘artists’, but gardeners, cooks and hairdressers ‘servants’. Artists work with sight and sound – senses we respect – and produce preservable art. But servants work with the “baser” senses and their achievements are evanescent.

Among the Eskimo, carvings are rarely saved. When spring comes and igloos melt, old habitation sites are littered with waste, including beautifully designed tools and tiny carvings, not deliberately thrown away, but, with even greater indifference, just lost.

To the Eskimo, carving, like singing, isn’t a thing. When you feel a song within you, you sing it; when you sense a form emerging from the ivory, you release it.

As the carver holds the unworked ivory lightly in his hand, turning it this way and that, he whispers, “Who are you? Who hides there?” And then, “Ah, Seal!” He rarely sets out to carve, say, a seal, but picks up the ivory, examines it to find its hidden form and, if that’s not immediately apparent, carves aimlessly until he sees it, humming or chanting as he works. Then he brings it out: Seal, hidden, emerges. It was always there: he did not create it, he released it; he helped it to step forth.

We think of art as a possession, and possession to us means control, to do with as we like. Art to the Eskimo is a transitory act, a relationship. They are more interested in the creative activity than in the product of that activity.

Hidden Art

Hidden art takes many forms: an insignia on the inner side of an Elizabethan finger-ring; Indonesian temples concealed beneath stone structures; paintings on the inside of a mummy case, facing the deceased.

I once saw a gold brooch whose form was abstract, until you blew on it, at which point its spinning parts form the letters KKK, for Ku Klux Klan.

Small cabins on the banks of the Rhine belong to families whose fishing rights date from medieval times. During *Fasnacht*, a three-day winter festival, cabins are left unguarded. An unidentified artist selects one and covers its inner walls with pornography. When the owner returns, he may simply lock the door. Or he may invite friends. Either way, tradition requires that the paintings remain one year, at which point they are eradicated. Such paintings generate wide speculation. Rumors abound. Old tales are revived. Yet only a few people actually *see* anything.

Secrecy as Private Identity

A tribe has been defined as a community where everyone shares all information simultaneously; but surely not *all* information. Even the smallest band of tribesmen keep secrets and enjoy mysteries, and art is a favorite hiding-place for both. Tribal art is filled with puzzles-pictures and visual puns and cryptic messages in cartoon shorthand. No stranger deciphers even the first layer of these many ambiguities.

Perhaps we should redefine a tribe as a group whose shared knowledge permits communication through secrecy. We, who have lost this ability, create instead the ultimate in accessibility as a substitute for the network of tradition.

We love to *solve* mysteries. Our children, when visiting grandmother, head first for the attic, there to open trunks. I was fascinated to learn that a safety deposit vault in Basel can be opened only by its owner, even though it lies dormant for a thousand years. Fascinated but skeptical: could any Westerner, even Swiss, resist?

Recently a museum collection of African fetishes, each sealed in leather shrouds, proved too tempting a mystery: the curator x-rayed them, thus satisfying his curiosity, while preserving their bindings.

If there's an Indian mound in the neighborhood, we open it. I doubt that a single known mound in North America has escaped endless violations. Nearly forty years ago, as an archeologist, I asked a landowner for permission to open a burial

mound. He refused, on the grounds he respected the mystery. I was disappointed, but I never forgot, nor condemned, his decision.

When American Indians burn their sacred treasures, rather than sell them to us, we are disappointed, but puzzled, and that puzzlement derives partly from respect.

Perhaps the real message of tribal art is not its form or its beauty, but its reminder of the gift of privacy.

I accept that there are mysteries best left unsolved – that some answers must forever elude outsiders. I was once very close to several Eskimo friends, but I gave up hope we could ever come to know each other completely. If I had come to know them completely, I would have become an Eskimo; I would have lost my own identity, and this I did not choose to do.

“We wed ourselves to the mystery,” not to conquer it or be conquered by it, but to greet it.

Edmund Carpenter

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