

A Sense of Belonging

Unlike most other artists, particularly those involved in the performing arts – dancers, musicians, actors, and film-makers – visual artists rarely work as part of an ensemble or where individuals combine their different skills and roles to produce a single common work.

Although there are a number of examples today of pairs of artists working as a single creative unit – e.g. Gilbert and George, Fischli and Weiss, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Webster and Noble – and many artists work with assistants, sometimes teams of assistants – the defining characteristic of contemporary art is that of the individual vision defined through an individually developed and recognisable visual language.

At a crucial level visual artists work alone. Their work must define and confirm the difference between their vision and that of other artists.

Yet, in my experience, of all the arts, none has a more highly developed and pervasive sense of community than the visual arts. Few romantic ideas about art are more misguided than that of the isolated genius.

In general the engagement with other artists begins in art school. Ideally an art school creates an intense experience of competitive discourse and common purpose amongst its students as well as between the students and their teachers, and through them, with the wider art world beyond the school, the world of exhibitions, galleries, publications, museums, etc. As a student, I was lucky enough to land at the Yale Art School during its most exciting years in the early Sixties. Though I arrived a naive greenhorn, I was quickly accepted as part of a community of shared interests, passions, and ambitions, where I felt ‘at

home’ in a way I never had before. I discovered that to be an artist was to become part of a community of people engaged through their individual work in a passionate and on-going debate about art. Amongst my fellow students were Richard Serra, Chuck Close, and Brice Marden. My whole sense of myself as an artist was established at Yale. When I came to Britain in 1966 I felt immediately welcome because the community of artists does



*The Fan (Lightbox at Regents Place, London) 2003
Ultralon white 'Flexface', translucent vinyl films
and aluminium. 2000 x 2000cm.
Courtesy Michael Craig-Martin and Gagosian Gallery*

not recognise national boundaries.

Through many years of teaching in Britain, often in very good art schools and always in contact with talented individual students, I hoped to rediscover that palpable sense of communal excitement I had known myself as a student. Only at Goldsmiths and for a few vivid years in the mid 80s did that truly occur. Jon Thompson, Richard Wentworth, and myself – who had all taught there for many years - provided the principal teaching catalyst but the chemistry was the students' own.

Amongst the BA students during those years were Angela Bulloch, Mat Collishaw, Ian Davenport, Angus Fairhurst, Anya Gallaccio, Liam Gillick, Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Michael Landy, Abigail Lane, Sarah Lucas, Richard Patterson, Simon Patterson, Fiona Rae. These very young artists became a closeknit community of friends, rivals, collaborators, and lovers and developed a dynamic bond of mutual competitive support which they took from Goldsmiths into the wider art world. The power of that communal bond changed the nature of the British art world.

☞ *Michael Craig-Martin 2007*

*Michael Craig-Martin's most recent project is a 25m wide projected computer animation titled **Things change**, on view in **Living in the Material World**, the opening exhibition of the new National Art Center in Tokyo, through 19 March 2007. The first comprehensive book on his work, *Michael Craig-Martin* by Richard Cork, was published in the autumn by Thames and Hudson, to coincide with his retrospective at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. His work is represented in London by Gagosian Gallery and Alan Cristea Gallery. www.michaelcraig-martin.com*

The romantic notion of an Artist at work, alone in the studio, suffering for his or her Art, endures beyond all reason. Even in this age of mass communication we can still be led to believe that creative genius is born of a singular, magical moment of inspiration, from the mind of an isolated individual, with no support or outside influence. However, the reality is far removed from this and what is nearer the truth is that an Artist alone is in bad company.

People look to Vincent Van Gogh, the original outsider, maligned and misunderstood in his own lifetime, as evidence of this theory. A troubled man with a troubled mind, he worked alone. Swimming against the fashionable art tides of the day, he was supported solely by his art dealer brother Theo, until his early death, to be posthumously revered forever more. Not only is his Artistic genius rightly idealised but also, perversely, his perceived poverty and personal pain. Some might well point out that to have a brother who believes in you and takes care of your financial needs is

a pretty wonderful thing that most artists I know would be very grateful for.

It is true that artists work alone much of the time but success will inevitably herald assistants and gallery owners, collectors and sycophants. More importantly, regardless of any success, away from the studio, an artist cultivates a sense of belonging within a wider artistic community to counter-balance the isolation felt from the rest of society. The egocentricity of the artist is not a pointer toward self-sufficiency, merely self-absorption and, more often than not, reveals an intrinsic insecurity, needing as much reassurance and pandering to, as being left alone. This balancing act of loving and letting be, criticism and admiration can be found in fellow travellers with a degree of empathy and mutual respect. At other times it can come in the form of worship, from ubiquitous acolytes who sacrifice themselves, not worthy in the presence of what they consider to be the greater and more noble virtue of original thought.

Historically, the major Art movements were easier to define and recognise as communities. They would ascribe to a common purpose of investigation or style. The Impressionists or Expressionists, the Fauvists or the Cubists. The Romantic, the Minimalist, the list goes on.

However, more significantly, outside of these terms of reference, artists live and work in studios close to each other, drink together and play together. They provide each other with an understanding of the creative process and indulge in each other's self-centred struggles. In a contemporary context it could be seen as a loose-knit, far reaching self-help group for the partially insane and occasionally brilliant.

Artists will always feel alone in the process of making their art. It is after all a decision making process and the only one making the decisions is the artist. Every decision made becomes a possibility for public humiliation and failure. Work that is revered by one person could be ridiculed by another. The artist's neck is always on the line and as such he or she will always feel exposed and isolated.

However, feelings are not facts. There is a wider community of artists from whom one can draw physical, emotional and intellectual support. A community that one chooses to be a part of and not only a living community but also one that stretches back in time throughout art history. An artist's historical influences become part of a family of like-minded others. The relationships formed through connecting with artworks invite empathy and a requisite sense of belonging that all artists desire in their self-constructed worlds. So, especially in this age of mass communication, with so much art available to see at the press of a button or the turn of a page, an artist is never alone and above all, need never be in bad company. ☞ *Christos Tolera*