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TEACHING ALLEGORICALLY

DEAN HUGHES



On the 3 April 2011, Roger Ackling gave me a small stick. I was attending the opening of his exhibition at Cairn, Pittenweem, Fife, and I had taken a small gift of some chocolates as way of saying congratulations. Upon receiving the chocolates, Roger said 'I have something for you too', and produced a small stick with my name and the date burned by focusing the sun's rays with a magnifying glass across one side. The stick now sits on my mantelpiece, leaning against a rusted and un-lovingly twisted metal shelf bracket, itself another gift from Roger. He had appeared at my door at Edinburgh College of Art several years ago, saying that he had found something on the beach while walking towards Blakeney point, North Norfolk; he thought it would 'resonate with me'.

I first met Roger in April 1993. I had applied for a place on the BA Fine Art – Painting degree course at Chelsea College of Art, London. He was on the panel who interviewed me. Along with Roger, there was also the British painter Freya Purdue, and a second-year painting student. I was especially nervous at this interview as, although I had applied to study Painting, I hadn't made any. Instead my portfolio consisted of a series of experiments and ideas, largely based around drawing and object-making. While I understood that this approach was welcomed and encouraged at Chelsea, I can still remember feeling a palpable sense of relief when Roger, who was last to introduce himself, said 'and I am Roger Ackling, and I don't paint'. I took that simple statement as an expression of artistic solidarity. I remember asking if I could flash the interview panel in the eyes with

Roger Ackling's stick, 2011, 15.5 x 0.7cm diameter
Courtesy Dean Hughes

a flash gun (onto whose 'screen' or 'lens' I had stencilled my full name), the idea being that my name would exist as an afterimage, burnt or overexposed onto the retina, would still be visible on the next interviewee's work after I had gone. Coincidentally, even if unknown to me at that point, Roger had made work over a *longue durée* by burning dots, which merged to become lines and using this technique he 'drew' parallel lines across the surface of discarded wood. Although I couldn't have accounted for or verbalised why at the time Roger's work registered with me, I do remember it seeming to fit, like a hand in a glove, to a sensibility I was drawn to. It was like a dart hitting a target and I have never forgotten this initial registration. One of the questions that Roger asked in the interview was: 'Art is essentially a visual medium, how do you feel about communicating thoughts which are not visual?'. It's a fundamental, yet brilliant conundrum.

Beyond the interview and its questions, the first conversation I remember having with Roger was on my first day at Chelsea. Upon meeting him in the lift he said, by way of advice, 'Don't ever feel the need to change while you're here'. In one of our initial tutorials that would have occurred in 1994 Roger told me that once, when he had been offered a place to study at the Royal College of Art, he had chosen to work in a primary school instead. There was one boy in the class who continually asked for a pencil to sharpen. Eventually, after the boy had made this request repeatedly, Roger lost his patience, gave the boy a box of pencils and just told him 'stop interrupting and go and do something... make a drawing or whatever... just go and do something'. At the end of the class all the children handed in their drawings and the boy with the pencils came up last. He slammed a pencil down in an indignant fashion and left with all the others. Picking up the pencil after looking at the other children's drawings, Roger discovered that in the nib or graphite tip of the pencil, the boy had carved what Roger realized was a self-portrait. It wasn't a fully functioning mimetic representation but it had eyes, nose, mouth and a hairline.

'Rubbish!' I said, 'I don't believe you'.

'It's true', he said. 'And you could draw with it. You could actually draw with someone's head'.

Roger promised to bring in the pencil to show me and the following day he returned. The pencil was exactly as he had described it. It resembled the American sculptor Tom Friedman's 1994 sculptural 'self-portrait' carved in an aspirin. During the same discussion Roger informed me that the same boy, corralling his classmates along the way, glued leaves back on one of the trees in the playground one autumn as a kind of proto- (and in my opinion superior) Andy Goldsworthy.

What was this about? Why was this story told to me? Why was this story of importance to me? And why am I retelling it now? This was a story about directness, and the relationship between having an idea and going off in the artistic process and making the idea, or the error in making a representation of an idea. I remember at that time I had been making, or rather I had been thwarted in making, maps of puddles in London. I had chosen a square mile around Chelsea College of Art and wanted to chart where rain water collected. Unfortunately for one month in September/October 1993 it didn't rain, so in lieu of my predetermined start I had made some schematic drawings of what happened when water falls on the floor (when poured). Because these drawings didn't look as though they had much time invested in them (investment of time being a quality I associated with art) I decided to stitch the lines that denoted my drawings and handwriting. These drawings still disappointed me and it was at this point that the conversation I outlined above occurred. It provided me with a necessary key, a way forward, and I made a series of drawings called *Thread On And Through Paper*, the first body of work I had made that looked like itself. Taking a length of thread and dropping it onto a photocopier I recorded its chance organisation. I then took a needle and thread and faithfully transcribed this shape into paper. The stitched line and the causal line it was denoting

dovetailed. If Roger had been more direct in his tutelage, I don't think this work would have been made. This is one of the virtues and values in my experience of art education. In the allegory that Roger outlined, there was a requirement for me to make sense of it for myself. As the sociologist John Law states, 'Allegory is the art of meaning something other and more than what is being said... it is the art of decoding that meaning, reading between the literal lines to understand what is actually being depicted'. I would say that all of my education under Roger, and all of our discussions were allegorical in nature. Nothing was said in a direct way, nor was I ever told 'I think you need a little bit more red up there,' or even 'Have you ever thought of using a different material?' – a generic kind of tutorial advice.

Tutorials at Chelsea were mostly conducted in studio spaces, and related to artwork that had emerged since the previous discussion. These meetings were always one-to-one and I can remember very few group discussions, which have since emerged as the gold standard of contemporary art education. The activity was concerned with looking at what had been made and initial reactions to the work, followed by a discussion about it. It was resolutely dialogical. I remember the conversations being quite long (no time limit was set) and the tutorial lasted, so it seemed to me, as long as it needed to. Upon reflection, one of the qualities this lends the teaching situation is that it moves the discussion beyond simple problem-solving. Thus the learning environment becomes an open space where questions can be encouraged that are of a more philosophical bias than what can be afforded by the pragmatism of 'how?', which seems disproportionately wedded to what is at hand. This is not to suggest that some of the tutorial discussions were devoid of probative advice.

In March 1994 I had begun embroidering London bus seats with the same pattern that was already on the fabric of the seat. As an activity it lacked the agency or direction of a cogent artwork and was instead something I felt compelled to carry out. I used a curved needle, used for upholstery, and carefully selected corresponding thread that would match imperceptibly to the mosaic-

like seat pattern. The work solicited no visual material and so in tutorials I had to find my way linguistically through the description of an activity. At one of these, towards the end of our discussion, Roger said that he would bring a piece of work the next morning that he would like me to see. The following morning arrived and Roger visited me in my studio but didn't appear to be carrying anything.

'Have you forgotten the artwork?', I asked.

'No, no,' and sitting down, he took off his coat and placed his arms behind the back of his head as if he was watching television or relaxing. Under each armpit was a small circle of stitching, a series of dashed lines that constituted a circle. Roger explained that he had received a parcel in the post and, upon unwrapping it, had found a nice shirt and thought 'what a wonderful gift'. It wasn't until he put his arms above his head that another friend pointed out, 'Roger, did you know you have an artwork under each of your arms?'

I have often wondered about this story and about who perhaps made this artwork. Roger was evasive, in a manner I can't recall now, about who its author was, and I never pursued the question any further. It does make me wonder how many of these stories, and others like them, were invented. Or were they genuine? Or invented in response to particular situations or occurrences? Either way, this particular narrative gave me license to continue a silly motivation, and follow my nonsense.

In my conversations with Roger it became apparent over a number of years that a viewer was being cultivated and developed 'within me'. There exists a pedagogical vogue within contemporary art education to hermeneutically discuss artwork in absentia, whereby students act as audience for an artwork and verbalise its reception to a silent and mute author, the purpose being to allow the author of the work to experience not only what was intended but also what was unintentionally expressed. Part of the problem of this approach is that it can place too much power within a social group and often students may feel propelled or motivated to make work towards this collective understanding. By contrast the teaching that I experienced at Chelsea with Roger saw no division between what I had made and myself.

There was no split between ‘I’ and ‘it’, but rather a relationship was cultivated under Roger’s tutelage that prioritised ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ (to call to mind Jewish philosopher Martin Buber). The relationships are kept alive within oneself, rather than in public servitude. It was a richly phenomenological education and Roger used to say that, for him, ‘he stood beside his work’. This also calls to mind the sentiment expressed in Italo Calvino’s essay ‘Whom do we write for? Or The Hypothetical Bookshelf’. In this text an imaginary organisation of books is described which places improbable publications together, unified within the sentience of a maker. For Calvino, ‘Reading a book is not an isolated or pure interaction between reader & author. Your reading is affected, even determined, by your experiences, the prior knowledge you bring to the book, by the other books you’ve read’.

Through meeting Roger I have always wanted to be two things, and artist and a teacher. What, for me, is a successful situation as a result of teaching? When I have set out to teach a particular thing, it seems to disappoint me. By this I mean that when I have deliberately tried to communicate a particular aesthetic sensibility that I hold, and it has been received, I have felt disappointed. This may sound counterintuitive but, for me, this is a crucial aspect of Roger’s teaching. I am very much taken with the notion outlined in Carl Rogers’ essay from 1961 entitled ‘Some Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning’ when he states, ‘Anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential, and has little or no significance on behaviour. I realise that I am only interested in learning, which significantly influences behaviour. I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning’. Rogers concludes his short essay by saying that he realises that he is only interested in ‘being a learner’.

What does this mean for our discussion? It means that the teaching I experienced as a student and the teaching I wish to share with my students is the opposite, I would say, of demonstrable. I would add that it is not a particularly transparent rhetoric. As a teacher I know I would be worried (I worry in sharing this now) if

what I said had hit the mark. This danger will take from students the freedom of thinking for themselves. The stories I have outlined are alive for me because I made sense of them myself. I find increasingly that students actually want instruction and this might point to the fact that allegory is something of a lost art, and that we have lost the craft of saying things indirectly. I think that from within the prevailing political agenda, which favours industry-focused courses where students are directly prepared for the job market, allegory can be incredibly useful and productive. John Law again states, ‘Allegory flourishes as an art form in contexts where there is explicit repression. If the regime (church, elders) does not tolerate criticism, then the conditions are in place for allegory’.

As a student, when I thought and looked at Roger’s work, it seemed to be imbued with ongoingness. He was always active in a way that I deeply admired and, importantly, that I found incredibly useful as a template by which to view my own working processes. In 2010 Roger was visiting Edinburgh as an external examiner. Over lunch we were talking about time and working when he asked, ‘Has your artwork been affected by your teaching commitments?’.

‘Sometimes I find it difficult to find the time...’ my voice trailed off as I was unsure of how to respond.

Almost interrupting my withering sentence, Roger stated, ‘You don’t need to find the time. The time is contained within the activity. Art is concerned with our relation to time’. At that point it was abundantly clear to me that some of some of Roger’s early work, where for instance the work was a ‘one hour’ durational drawing, were quite possibly made during a lunch hour. For the remainder of his visit, and at his insistence, we formed a group of artists who would ‘use time differently’; and he gave me a small note of a football team arranged in 1235 formation consisting solely of artists – with a devastating front line of Blinky Palermo, Ed Ruscha, Donald Judd, Richard Tuttle and James Lee Byars.

Roger once recounted a story to me about having his photograph taken. When he was in London, he lived in a three-storey townhouse on Forest Road in Hackney. It was a tall house and the kitchen

was located on the ground floor at the rear, adjacent to a windowed seating area that backed onto a full and wonderful garden. The photographer had decided to take Roger's portrait in the bathroom of the house, which was located on the third floor. The process of making the image was to relate directly to its subject, in that it was to be taken in darkness with the camera's shutter remaining open, to burn the image over a longer duration than would normally be expected. What this process necessitated was for Roger to remain completely still and motionless, and his eyes to remain open – he couldn't blink. While this operation was being conducted on the third floor, dinner was being prepared on the ground floor and onions were being chopped. As he sat in the darkness staring impassively at the open shutter, Roger started to feel the effect of the onions and he felt tears begin to form in his eyes. Roger suggested to me that, although he must have been on the third floor many times, maybe even in the bathroom, as onions were being chopped; he had never started to feel the effect of freshly chopped onions. He said that the occasion made him think about how much he missed every time he blinked.

I think about this last story perhaps more than any others that I have recounted. It locates what is at stake in Roger's artistic outlook and within his approach to teaching. There is a necessity for artists to look at the world with fresh and unencumbered eyes; now and here, I take the sense he gave me, of a continuing inquiry.