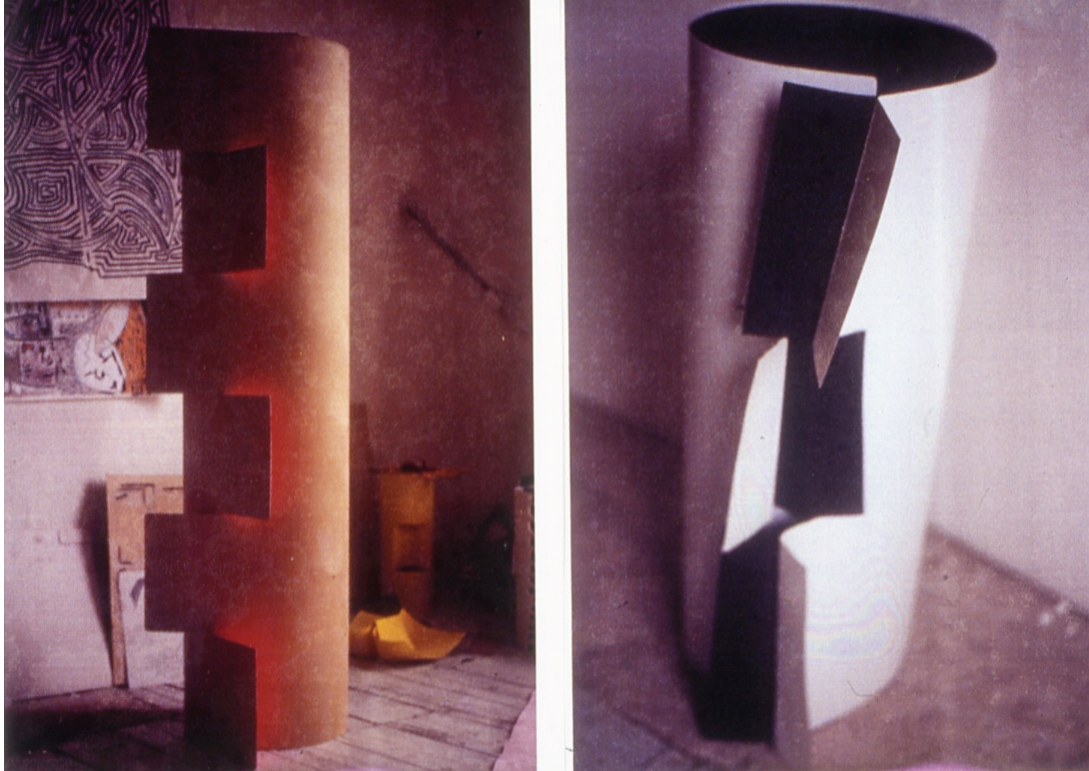


'The Letter Blue' Volume I



During the 1990s, the obvious thing to do as an artist in London was to go to Goldsmiths College Fine Art MA and try to get yourself noticed by the burgeoning art world, driven by the reputation of the YBAs and crying out for the attention of Mr Saatchi (now called 'Charles' seemingly without irony, by everyone who works with, near, around or about him)¹.

I looked at the work of the students at Goldsmiths at the time, listened to reports, talked to tutors and decided that, though rightly upheld as a world-class art school it would be anathema to my own adventures and trajectory as an artist for the following reasons:

(1.) I suspected that the environment would be too rough in that it might well be dominated by a few strong-willed individuals against which other students and their work would be compared and judged (for similar reasons I rarely

¹ Recently I heard an up-and-coming new Tory referring to the disreputable Thatcher as 'Margaret' on a radio interview until the interviewer asked him to clarify!

attended secondary school), that kind of scenario would be destructive to my fragile, highly personal and precious (in the best sense of the word) speculations which needed a lot of careful understanding and a certain pace to bring them into the world in one piece. I still don't hold with any educational environment which makes the most sensitive, gradually developing or simply different students feel intimidated, rushed or distracted by any normative or dominant idea of what is 'good' or 'successful'.

(2.) In the work I saw that Goldsmiths annually, I noted that, though it was indeed attractive to Mr Saatchi and palatable to the burgeoning and established gallery scene as a kind of acceptable face of late postmodernism, its repeated post-modern trope of surface ironics (most notable in painting) and a sense of the artist surrendering all his most useful speculative powers to pander to the requirements of marketable trends all went completely against my own reasons for being an artist.

As a result, I chose what might be called the opposite path, and, rather than try to spend two hurried years scurrying for fame at Goldsmiths I instead spent 7 long, slow years, practically alone, in a small, neo-modernist garret-style apartment in the very top of a tall house on the very top of London's Brixton Hill.

In seven years (equivalent to a practice based PhD, and during which I did attempt to draft an unsupervised PhD length thesis) an artist can think, make, draw, photograph, write and build their way through an awful lot of ideas about art, un-distracted by a course timetable, other influential personalities or celebrity tutors. It's often lonely and desperate of course and there were times when only my record collection saved me and got me through nights when I would watch the moon arc its way across the sky South of London, or the sun do the same thing through some surprisingly empty days when I feared I had become a part of the furniture of the apartment and lost my human status.

But those difficult times (that you are most unlikely to encounter on any standard, institutionalised art course) were really the most important, when commitment and idiosyncrasy were deepened and confirmed and identified and you really confronted the scale of art's problems, possibilities and propositions, and how you might measure up to all that.

Art is a great and noble vocation. It is ancient and its history is great –I have concluded. Anyone who spends their career ironically laughing off like a stand-in for Ricky Gervais is wasting a lifetime's opportunity and doing the vocation a great dis-service. Nor is Art a 'profession' –as we have so often been told in the rancid fallout from the Thatcher years - that is just a convenient reduction of its true importance and real potency and mystery which makes it palatable and unthreatening to the Thatcherite/Saatchi-ite generation that have now grown past their sell-by-date into positions of mandarin-like power. Part of the endgame of annexation and expropriation of art for strictly bourgeois purposes is to make it MANAGE-able. Those who sold-it-out to the consumer boom and bourgeois paradise that attended it, so that another coffee bar (needed like a hole in the head) in every gallery

space increased the audience for art but did little to challenge the domination of the art world by the same class of people who made it all seem so inaccessible and incestuous as when I arrived in London 30 years ago.

No, art is far more than a profession, and often, it is only by being far from professional or far more than professional that one even glimpses what art is and what kind of artist one might begin to become.

At the end of my 7 years as a hermit I did 2-3 small shows in my own flat which doubled as a studio. I invited a small number of friends and documented the work -much of it very poorly, 'unprofessionally' in fact, but in a way that now has charming idiosyncrasies compared with the generic 'professional' style of documentation that students are often taught to pursue by art-world savvy pros –turned tutors. Personally, I think every part of a practice is available for speculation, innovation, disruption and idiosyncrasy, and this stretches all the way from inspiration to documentation, and beyond, to various economies and means of dispersal. Look at those old hand made prints from dodgy negatives by Brancusi and you may get inspired yourself to detour from the same-ol Frieze-journal-style HIGH quality renditions of your work.

There is so much work from those 7 years that it is difficult to know how to present it. I have cases full of poem and prose, art reviews and text experiments, plus photographs, unprocessed or unprinted films, drawings, half a ton of crammed notebooks and documentations of sculptures, maquettes and little installations. I recently approached a couple of small and interesting curatorial projects who I thought might be interested in its, now trendy neo-modernism, but as yet received no affirmation (this is not unusual as I seem to have cultivated the antithesis of bourgeois nepotism, with the aim that my work will always be judged by other than the fact that it is being appraised by drinking partners in a mutual career-in.) Therefore, I'm going to gradually make it available here, in the free and live space of the web, ungoverned by hegemonic cliques, old school ties or one's capacity to drink away the night.

The little shows I did in the apartment studio in Brixton were titled 'Pow-Wow', 'Latent Neo-Modernism', 'No-Show' and 'Near-Show' (in that order). They included many neo-abstract drawings and sculptures which partly resulted from a rejection –immediately upon graduating- of the post-modern ethos I had been taught as an undergraduate, and motivated by a need to recapture a more personal and true belief in materials, hands, forms, and a certain grace and economy of ideas and things informed by light, line, colour and a clean heart.

It's going to take a while to start uploading this material, some of it is hard to dig out and very little of it has been scanned etc. But this here is a beginning. Of the many artist's writings, poems, reviews and prose that I wrote while I was on my Crusoe-like island one particular text called 'The Letter Blue' seemed to best tie together all that I was doing in the space along with all what I was doing in my head and in my life during that pivotal hiatus from the relative crudeness and cruelty of the 'real world'.

I therefore collect the whole 7 year fine Art studio project together under that title 'the Letter blue' and call this PDF 'The Letter Blue' Volume 1.

Look out for further volumes in the months to come.

Paul O'Kane,
October 2009