In January 2016 Patrick Healy, Amsterdam based philosopher and artist, was invited by the School of Design [The Hong Kong Polytechnic University], to conduct a series of PhD and research seminars. With Patrick in Hong Kong for 3 weeks, and knowing him for a number of years, it provided us an ideal opportunity to – not only – reminisce about old times but use the lunch time discussion to understand how his philosophical position, artistic research and personal interest intersect. The following discussion was the result of this discussion exposing the man behind the philosopher in the process of becoming himself.

By Gerhard Bruyns

Artomity:

You’re a philosopher, performance artist, painter, sculptor, educator and writer. When and how did you get the idea of combining art and philosophy?
Patrick Healy:

Well, during my studies of philosophy – at almost the very end of my formal studies – we started reading Nietzsche. In itself that was considered very daring because my teachers mostly specialised in metaphysics and medieval and ancient philosophy. So it was almost like coming into modernism in one move.

I was very interested in the way that Nietzsche thought that the philosopher-artist distinction should be literally eradicated. There was no need to split up things, to say you’re a philosopher or a painter. That’s what you had to search for: the expressive becoming of will in the world. Not a “will to power” but the “will of power”. So rather than finding the nihilism threatening, I found it emancipatory.

In a way, when you are in your early 20s you can understand some of this and see where it’s coming from. Nietzsche, especially his early work, said: your task as a human is to become who you are. And I saw that argument as meaning that you have to know yourself and explore in a very experimental and sometimes pretty risk-filled way your existence in the world, and not be afraid of your own mistakes, stupidities and inadequacies. Living life as an experiment, and life-living as a chance, seemed to me risky but so attractive.

So I began to write. I wrote a small novella, *Up in the Air and Down*, based on a kind of imagined childhood memory of Ireland. I was then doing research, quite strange I suppose, on the history of books, as I was interested in these books I had been holding in my hand and their covers. With a friend I wrote a history of 18th-century Irish bookbinding. I was very interesting in reconstructing the workshops of craftsmen, how something that appeared anonymous had left these traces of design and beauty that could be reconstructed and followed. I was fascinated that in these craft traditions a form of democracy of taste emerged.

I then became interested in the relationship between critical theory and explanations for art. Was it possible to explain art rationally? Did immanent critique make one able to do so, and create something expressive of real experience and emotion? If Nietzsche said the philosopher-artist has to be the new “type”, what did that mean in terms of expressive communication? All this was going on in my mind during the late 1970s, at a time when I was growing up in Ireland. Being born in Dublin, I was very interested in the writings of Joyce. After the first novella I wrote, which was published by the Malton Press, I continued making contributions to poetry journals, and I came to see from reading Heidegger and Nietzsche that we had got into a strange position where we underestimated the truths brought to us by art and poetry, and instead we were saying that scientific claims about reality were the only important things.
I saw how we were impoverishing our own humanity in some way, by a false metaphysical idea of truth as science, and that this de facto was the new metaphysics.

I went into my own research, partly inspired by discussions at the time in liberation theology that I was reading, partly inspired by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), women’s movements and women’s rights, and partly inspired by the political situation in Ireland with the IRA and the discussion around what was then called Ireland’s post-colonial situation as a partitioned country.

There was a problem of ‘logos’, as the Greeks called it: trying to make sense of things at a time when it seemed as if a subjective nihilism was the main order of the day. It was the beginning of deconstructivist philosophy. I remember being handed Jacques Derrida’s *Of
Grammatology (1967) to read, and thinking “I cannot read this”, as I had just been reading Thomas Aquinas’ work on truth in the Summa Theologica (1265-74). My thesis had been Truth in Aquinas and Heidegger.

This book by Derrida was like an explosion. It was very wild in terms of its thinking. And it took quite some time to come to terms with what they called postmodernism. I was living in a country that had almost a medieval sort of life, coming into postmodernism without quite understanding where the modernism was. Modernism was represented through art by Joyce but it was not a modernisation in social terms. It fascinated me that you could have these highly advanced modernist phenomena going on among artists, which were so far ahead of society. I began to see that artists could be the ones who give us the future, through the intensity of their engagement with themselves and their own social and political situation.

Later, at University College Dublin, I studied, I suppose in retrospect in a nonchalant way, sociology and Semitic languages. I enjoyed my prolonged life as a student and never had any precise ambitions. I believed in going on from one situation and finding the way to the next; I still do.

Afterwards I had a job as a researcher and assistant to Professor Lyons in the History of Medicine department of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland: a wonderful experience of reading and cataloguing. Then I went to live in Germany for a year to learn German, and went on to Paris and with Professor Claude Schaefer studied Max Raphael; the study still continues, with a book about the early work of Raphael to appear in a couple of months.

Artomity:
You’re an expert on the work on Joseph Beuys: how did you make the link from Joyce to him?

PH:
I was invited to give lectures on Joyce, I worked on Finnegans Wake, and I later decided to record all of it. And that was what brought me into performance art. But what really triggered my interest was when I was invited by the director of the Hugh Lane Dublin City Gallery to come and meet this German artist who was visiting Ireland. His name was Joseph Beuys.

I recall reading a book on Marcel Duchamp at that moment. I had just explored Andy Warhol for the first time, which for a student of philosophy living in Ireland was considered a little bit odd, even superficial. That, to me, is very strange in retrospect: that one would be made to feel somehow superficial for being interested in Duchamp, Beuys and Warhol.

I began to see that the whole problem of the modern movement in art – certainly in the Duchampian sense – had ended up as a tension between Beuys on the one hand and
Warhol on the other. I saw them as like Nietzsche’s Dionysus-Christ. Could you bring them together or do they always have to be in opposition? Because Beuys was this remarkable artist who said that the idea of dimensionality in sculpture has to change, so it becomes about the social processes of making. It has political and social implications. Beuys helped found the German Green Party and promoted direct democracy in Germany.

He arrived in Ireland in 1976. At the time I had contact with Etna Waldron, then director of the Municipal Gallery; Oliver Dowling, who was on the Irish Arts Council; the artist Cecil King; and the critic and writer Dorothy Walker. They were the avant-garde at that time in Dublin, and they set up an international exhibition called *ROSC, A Poetry of Vision*. They tried to take a culture whose traditions of visual arts were far less impressive than its writing or poetry to greater critical awareness of visual art and modernism.

They were pioneer modernists, even though it was 60 to 70 years after what had happened in Paris, Germany and other places. It was when Beuys arrived that I became aware of what was happening in American art, about Warhol’s work, and about image, money and the social, and whether there was a social responsibility for artists. This, social responsibility, has been on my mind for almost 40 years.

**Artomity:**
How did the contact with Beuys open doors to art and other artists?

**PH:**
Beuys thought Ireland was a very good place to start the Free International University of Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research. I was very interested in how a university could become more artistic, and how we could get artists to become more academic.

So it was exactly the same issue as reading Nietzsche: how can philosophy become more artistic and the artist become philosophical? Nothing has changed in my life; it’s been the same thing repeating internally. Here in Hong Kong I meet the same issue, in design schools and universities: people who want more creativity, who want innovation. Of course we want those; they are very positive words. Why would we not want those positive things? But we still have to find out what they mean. I think you can sometimes check very simply: if you’re in a highly creative environment, then people don’t want to go home at night. After classes are over students want to hang out in the building as it is a creative place and they can be themselves.

**Artomity:**
When did you really start making art?
PH:
I remember when I was 10 I used to make these little caricatures for a while, but I did not really begin painting until my 30s. I was directly inspired by Beuys’ social-performance events from the late 1970s. I always considered that what I wrote and what I studied were interconnected. So I was not making this distinction between a writer or a philosopher. I was never interested in those kind of determinations.

I was still trying to find out something I had discovered reading Nietzsche, in one of his early essays, about fate. The idea of: ‘Do you have to do something in your life?’ Sometimes you would know things negatively; you could not say why but your instinct told you this wasn’t the way to go. I had jobs going on at the same time, as I did not want to be dependent on my family. I valued my independence.

I had written a whole series of proposals to the Irish Arts Council for performances informed by various things I would do, like reading a book to a tree in a public park – all kinds of things that now look like crazy ideas. I was connecting with performance art in Düsseldorf and I was obviously aware that there was not much of an audience for a lot of it. For some of it there was, because in Ireland there still was a big acceptance of poetry reading.

It is very valuable to have grown up in a culture with such a high regard for language, for storytelling, for humour, but also for creative achievement within poetry and prose. Somebody from Dublin will automatically know or have a connection with Wilde, O’Casey, Shaw, William Butler, Yeats, Joyce: it’s quite a list of world writing. And so there is something mysterious about the place, as to why. I think the reason was that someone was respected for being a poet and nothing else, just that; even if they were slightly drunk most of the day, there was still a value for society which was visible at every social level. And in a sense it is that sort of everyday-ness of patronage that gave this very small city at the edge of Europe this power within the world of art, and explains why someone like Beuys would think that it was a very good place to have the Free International University.

Artomity:
What is your connection to the Venice Biennale?

PH:
That came through the FIU in Italy. A very strong supporter of Beuys was the Baroness Lucrezia De Domizio Durini. She made this place in Bolognano, called the Paradise Plantation, where she planted thousands of new trees in homage to Beuys, with reference to Beuys’ famous performance in Kassel, when he planted 7,000 oaks. Another person that helped Beuys with that, Carl Giskes, lives in Amsterdam and is a member of the FIU. Waldo Bien, with whom I wrote a book, also worked in Beuys’ circle at that time. These
were the ecological, earth-minded followers of Beuys, interested in new ideas about banking, economics, farming and ecology. Please remember that in Europe, at that time, this was considered quite eccentric. So here is this small group of artists and other people inspired by this great artist who are quite happy to disappear now that the broader ideas themselves have become much more part of the main social world. What’s important is that a small group of committed people, if they just keep going on and are inspired by what is good, can achieve things in the world. So there is a real possibility for agency, and it does not always have to be put in pseudo-revolutionary terms. Revolutions happen in their own way and take a long time; the consequences can take centuries. I think it’s important that the interface between one’s own creativity and the whole of society and the world is the continuous dialectic.

**Artomity:**
Tell us about Paleo Psycho Pop, or PPP, which is an almost anarchic, performative art movement.

**PH:**
In one sense it just came out of the connection between me and Hilarius Hofstede, a very inspired artist. He was coming to the end of a tour called *Moscow | Amsterdam | Dublin – the MAD Tour*. When he arrived in Dublin I thought it would be good to have an actual street magazine to make a lot of the various things available that we had been working on together for 10 years.

*Paleo Psycho Pop Issue 1 was the MAD Tour*. The entire PPP archive can be found online, 41 numbers in total. If you read through that and all the different events, the FIU events and what PPP is, PPP becomes its own movement. Effectively it was an underground publication and has remained so until now. Some issues had 10,000 copies distributed, depending on what money we could get to support it. It was never driven by high-end design values.

A lot of artists gave freely of their creative work, so no money was ever involved, except photocopying of course, and even with the photocopying we did art swaps. We entered into a whole new economy to create this possibility.
When you look at all the art events today, how much do philosophy and theory still play a role?

PH: We don’t make any money out of any of this, and we never have, and as you know that is the dilemma. Artists in recent times have almost always said that they stand outside of and criticise capitalist systems, and yet they are the ones who make the most money.
What we have tried to do with FIU and PPP is say you can even have, as we do, a collective of more than 2,000 art works which nobody owns. If, for example, an institution said that it would take care of that collection according to the principles of FIU, then they can have it. We’ve tried to say that if you work locally then all these issues of globalisation take on different shapes and different demands.

We wanted an order that did not exclude anyone, we wanted diversity and we did not want dogmatism. Because our idea of democracy is about the Greek term ‘demos’; it is not so much about a large group of people, but more about the power of understanding what is common to all of us. And that is art itself.

As Lucrezia once said in a speech: “Time is our friend.” We are not imposing something in order to have power; we are simply saying that if we don’t understand how to live with these economies, and with the earth, then there will be no life for the human species.

I think what’s happening with art today is you get a lot of politically oriented discourse and works, and far less interest in big-name individuals. There is a lot more art because of the internet; it has allowed a resurgence of creativity and creative expression for people, as they feel that they are empowered to create platforms and reach out to communicate with many people, which was formerly the domain of high-end publishers and specialist journals. I think we are in a very rich, complex time of communication for artists. Our problem will be to try and see whether the common still holds us together or whether it just becomes atomised egoism of a very extreme kind.

Artomity:
We see a lot of artists moving away from that. David Hockney, for example, who you know, is moving into a world of highly capitalist production cycles.

PH:
I think that when Hockney went back to England he started doing almost romantic pictures of nature again. He played with the problem of the photographic image and very clever visualisation. Essentially Hockney has always been a pop artist, so he still belongs in the Warhol camp. He’s not in the Beuys camp. That split is still there, I would say.

Artomity:
Is there any art project you’re working on now?

PH:
Becoming myself.
by Artomity Magazine

Hong Kong's Art Magazine

PREVIOUS POST
A Vision in ink

NEXT POST
Anish Kapoor

SOCIAL

INSTAGRAM