

Humor : Human :: Stricture : Structure

Artist's Statement by Paul Hertz

“...si lo matemático es absolutamente cierto—y, como viene a decir Galileo, ni el mismo Dios podría entender el teorema de Pitágoras de forma más clara o diferente de la nuestra—, eso basta para infundir confianza; confianza, ante todo, en que podemos manipular la realidad concreta del mundo, pero, lo que importa más, en que nuestro espíritu no es cualquier cosa, y su afán y su conquista de la verdad forman parte de una dignidad consciente de tener algún sentido, es decir, con un valor de calidad moral que la integre en este ámbito divino que testimonian las matemáticas.”

“...if the mathematical is absolutely certain—and, as Galileo had just said, not even God himself could understand the Pythagorean Theorem any differently than we ourselves do—that would be enough to inspire confidence, confidence above all that we could manipulate the concrete reality of the world, but, of still greater import, that our spirit is not just another thing, and that its yearning for and conquest of the truth form part of an authority aware of making sense, that is to say, bearing a moral value that integrates it into the divine circumference to which mathematics bears witness.”

José Maria Valverde, *Vida y Muerte de las Ideas*, p. 102
Editorial Planeta, Barcelona, 1980

We live in a time when the circumference of divine truth has been ruptured, when the self-aware authority once imagined for mathematics and conferred by extension on all the technologies it enabled has been riven from within and without. Gödel's Incompleteness theorem, complexity theory, fractal geometry and chaos theory have sown mathematics with uncertainties and limits—mathematically expressible, to be sure—that make its palatial architecture waver like a mirage. The historical aberrations of technology, the degradation of the environment, the nightmare logic of war, and the cultural falsehoods and bad faith of colonial power compel us to a critical distrust of our motives and our capacity to know the truth and make sense of the world. Anyone who holds out hope for the culture of knowledge, rationality, and tolerance that emerged from the European Renaissance must confront not only the supposedly “exterior forces” of irrationality and intolerance, but the recorded hypocrisy of humanistic culture itself. Many voices urge its demolition, some in expectation of a return to eschatological thought or a lost cultural purity, others equally vehement in promulgating a New Age or a New Order.

Within such a tremendous collision, what can an artist do, who still hopes for a culture where individuals together can make sense of the world and themselves? Political art is certainly one possibility, though the artist as citizen has other modes of expression. Humor, I suggest, is another.

Like beauty, that old hobby horse of artists, humor flashes by in a moment of grace, a lightning, lightening glimpse. Unlike beauty, it perpetrates its illusions to penetrate illusion, pausing the game barely long enough to defy gravity. By deflating gravity, that “mysterious carriage of the body to hide defect of the mind,” as

Tristram Shandy has it, humor offers a sense of scale more intimately human than do all-encompassing systems and universal truths. By disengaging us from our cherished misunderstandings, it staves off the collisions that measure our current rate of change. Humanistic culture may survive if we can put it on a diet, slim its proportions, recalibrate its scope to the scale of our individual doubts and strivings, discarding the false optics of nation, race, creed, or ideology.

If my works on paper, installations, performances and music, created over a span of some thirty years, possess an elaborate formal language, in line with Constructivist art of the 20th century avant-garde, I hope they also own up to a sly mischief, smearing formality with muddy meaning. In the wider scope of my work, of which visual patterns are but one manifestation, I aim for something akin to expressionistic excess, spawning artists and generative systems, laying stricture on structure, mixing media and modality. Complex systems arise from simple systems, and meaning canters in on the back of sufficiently self-referential systems—or so the story goes. Shouldn't a sufficiently complex system be able to ask whether it should take itself seriously? Let the grand metaphysical structures slouch into ruin. With the giddy aplomb of a clown on a tightrope, let us step out—into thin air, into the next moment, into the next epoch.

Chicago, April 2011

An earlier version of this text appeared in the catalog *Paul Hertz: Works on Paper*