

MSN Conversation Paul Shepheard and Claudia Zeiske

4 May 2007

claudia says:

Hi Paul, good morning, how is life down in London?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

Hi Claudia! Life in London is full of distractions as usual.

claudia says:

Did you follow our elections this morning?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

Not yet - getting Felix off to school is full of a different kind of information. I find elections usually turn out as the pollsters say they would. Polling is feedback, it slows things to a standstill. It should be outlawed. I think if I was Scottish I would be hoping for independence in federated Europe.

claudia says:

Interesting, do you think, they/we will cope?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

Who is they/we - is that like where/when? Independence would be a coping strategy in itself, I think.

claudia says:

I am writing they/we, as I am still not sure whether I have - though granted voting rights - got the moral right to call myself a Scot after 12 years. But lets move from the power of politics to the power of art, or even more importantly in relation to your work to the power of the critics: here/now. When you were with us here in Huntly the last two months, you expressed a concern of the power of art critics , almost called it arrogance to criticise things that others might like. Can you tell us a bit more about what you mean?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

I think I would have been talking about the oppositional tactics of critics who use criticism to define a position by negating - usually the previous generation's - works. I have lately been wondering whether I should only do positive criticism. One of the difficulties is that literary criticism has seeped into everything, and elevated meaning as an issue over everything else.

Another difficulty is that artists themselves use criticism of the evaluative kind as creative analysis of their own work. My current slogan is that you don't use criticism - criticism is use. Creativity and criticism are different things. So confusion abounds in the art world. Not least the problem that you can in fact make things by using them: sheep tracks across fields for instance.

claudia says:

Only positive criticism? That would be paradise for us artists and art producers. Do you think we would all become complacent? And what about contemporary art itself being criticism and no longer art, given that it is so full of the revelations of philosophy and science. Do you like reading art criticism?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

Well that is part of what I think, that contemporary art has become criticism itself. Perhaps positive criticism is a sort of parallel activity to what's being spoken of, a

sort of addition to it. Paradise of course is not the word I would use because I'm a nit picker - paradise is a fantasy. What I mean is attainable and would be a sort of evolutionary wilderness.

As to enjoying art criticism - it almost invariably makes me angry. At public sessions I get up and make a fool of myself by being contrary. At the last Artangel meeting I went to one of the speakers said we live in a mediated world, so full of commentary by the newspapers that we need art to counteract it. And then went on to applaud a work that was about the refugees in Dover.

I was up on my feet - "what do you mean, "about". If something is about something it is a mediation itself - so what's the difference between what the Daily Mail does and what the artists do?" To which the answer was "The Daily Mail gives you reasons to hate, art gives you reasons to love." For heaven's sake! It was this that prompts me to say, when people ask me what my book is about, "It isn't ABOUT anything. It IS something." It sounds nice, but if it's a book it's not really sustainable. Writing isn't music and it isn't painting, though I think literature is to painting what poetry is to music and sculpture is to architecture.

claudia says:

John Berger, in his classic book *Ways of Seeing*, starts with the phrase: 'Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak'. You told me that your son Felix has heavily influenced your thoughts that led to the writing of *How to Like Everything*? the book you have been working on when you were with us in residence. Maybe tell us a bit more about this relationship?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

I have three children, like you - and right from the start I was sympathetic to the way acquisitive interest constructs what a person knows - so striking later, when school arrives, and the pull of stasis and convention appears in their lives. Felix is what at the moment is called a special needs child - they're thinking of changing the description to additional needs which is just so typical of the stasis factories that our schools have become - and is therefore resistant to convention. In some ways he is a natural artist; by which I mean his constructions are not critical of the world, they add to it. On a more calamitous level, this life he has is in danger of being blighted by the rigours of normality. It has made me extremely conscious of the way prejudice and norms, averages and benchmarks define our lives. He is pushing eleven years now, and this project has been hatching over the last six - knowing him has been a revelation in how much of our activity is geared towards securing the future. He lives in the present, and so the present has become the milieu of the *How To Like Everything* project.

claudia says:

When you first arrived, you gave me three images to illustrate what your work is about. One of an Early Dutch Painting of the busy interior of a church, the other of a photo you took of a pig farming landscape near Lossiemouth with exercising fighter planes in the sky, and the last one a most revealing Italian Renaissance painting of a young boy with a portrait drawing of himself.

Maybe you could talk a bit more about these images, how they relate to each other and how they in combination draw together your thoughts for the book.

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

One of the complications of how to like everything is the question - what is everything? The present is another word for it, I think at the moment, because the present has everything in it. The present has all the past in it, too, held as evidence or memory - there is no material past outside the present. The boy with his picture is one of the prompts to that thought - he is a fifteenth century child, but the drawing he holds up is a child's drawing that might have been done this morning. It is as though the story of art as written by Gombrich need not exist. Picasso said something along these lines. The other two pictures are about a slightly different subject - another complication.

One of the tactics for dealing with everything is to draw a boundary round a number of things and call them by a name - it's what democracy does. Everyone not entitled to vote is a barbarian, from the other side of the fence, where the wilderness is. 'Emergence' isn't an alternative mode of working, it's a description of the world, and I think the stasis structures that I am criticising also operate in the emergent world I am trying to describe - it's just that they draw lines round pieces of it and pin them to the ground. They deny the **emergencies**. Now the other two pictures are part of an attempt I was making to use this tactic, but without the normalising intent: The Dutch painting is of the Holy Kinship, which is part of a mediaeval movement designed to give Christ a genealogy - so it represents a collection of thoughts that accumulate around the baby himself. I was attracted to it because of this additional mode, and found in it a thought called "everything places" - a sort of material analogy, a sort of temporal everything. I've been on the lookout for everything places since then, and thought I found one at Lossiemouth: the town on the hill in the background, the mountains in the distance, the pig farm in the foreground and the spread of the air force base with its parallel reality constructions and camouflage in the middle-ground all add up to a complex landscape. If I was describing the landscape I would call it accumulative rather than essential. Does that all make sense?

claudia says:

Sense? Not sure, but I like the idea of pondering about the notion of the present and the looking out for 'everything places'. Where does the supernatural come in, or lets put it **bland**: do you believe in god?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

No! There are times that I find myself believing in the devil, but I have to be an atheist to think what I think. Vitalism I can respond to - the concept that life itself is the force that people refer to as spirituality. Have I mentioned the Rachmaninov vespers to you? The Nunc Dimitis contains a bass line so low that it's very hard to sing - and because in unaccompanied choirs the pitch tends to drift flat without instruments to maintain it, this deep bass can become even more problematical. I think of it as an attempt by the composer to demonstrate that there is a human absolute - and that's as close to a spiritual thought that I get.

claudia says:

WOW. That reminds me of my condition last week; loosing voice and this opportunity of expression was an interesting experience. I will keep the Rachmaninov bass as a reference, if you don't mind. Back to the book and to god. Can you re-tell us the story of Pilgrim's Progress, and how this influenced your thinking?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

Atheism has been in the news recently. Occasioned by a rather bad tempered book by Richard Dawkins, who takes the disdainful line of a rationalist, and of course by the intractable nihilism of the suicide bombers. The pilgrim's progress is a very readable account of the pursuit of salvation, told as an analogy in which the hero, Christian, ascends the (straight and narrow) path through the (slough of despond) to the celestial city. It's a Baptist's account told in the 1670's by a man imprisoned for his non-conformism. Right towards the end of the journey, up almost in the clouds, Christian himself meets "The Atheist" who falls about laughing when he hears about Christian's mission and says he has been looking for the celestial city himself for twenty years and concluded that it just plain doesn't exist. He is a much more sympathetic fellow than Dawkins because he doesn't waste time trying to insist that Christian thinks like he does, but goes back down the mountain to re enter the material world and all the fun that awaits him. When I was searching for structures for How To Like Everything I wondered whether to frame it as this man's descent back into the actual world. It is still a possibility.

claudia says:

Are then in your view art and art criticism two entirely different disciplines?

paul@paulshepherd.com says:

I'm not sure I believe in disciplines. I think they are different activities, the one making, the other using; the inhabitant of a building is a critic, as much as the person who writes about and analyses it. The positive criticism I spoke of before would be another kind of art activity; some artists find the activity of critics parasitic, and positive criticism might be also!

paul@paulshepherd.com says:

I understand, essentially you are a critic of art criticism. But then you want to move on from that point of departure, hence the search for a structure on how to represent the How to like Everything in the material world. Where does the symbol of the sculpture of the horses come in here?

The sculpture is Apollo in his chariot on top of the Grand Palais in Paris (Georges Recipon) a fin-de-siecle copper construction, very extravagant. It's partly to do with liking everything: when I showed it at lectures at the turn of this century, quite a lot of people couldn't see how great it was because it was everything the modernists despised. But also: it's a quadriga, a four horsed chariot.

It's become a symbol to me of a particular kind of theorising. I used to like three part theories, because of their formal stability - each pair reinforces the third. Four parters are instable, breaking in halves easily, or into a three plus one. I think I picked this up from reading Gilles Deleuze. The instable quality is dynamic, which is what is so useful. It was part of an attempt to describe the everything-present: I had it in mind that each of us lives at the point of the present instant in four emerging fields; the expanding universe from the big bang **till** now: the evolution of the biomass, including the human species, from 4 billion years ago **till** now; the development of your tribe, from (say) 20,000 years ago till now, and your own life, from conception **until** now.

claudia says:

Now, now, all now; no future. The future is all speculation, like Christian. Does Now then represent materialism for you? The meaning of materialism is often attached to notions of greediness and avarice, but that seems not what you are interested in, you seem to be interested **is** the opposite, like notions of generosity, I guess. Celebrating what is there, not criticising, breaking it, and making it instable.

paul@paulshepherd.com says:

That's right - the notion that materialism is greed is a calumny put about by idealists, who want you to concentrate on the after life, not this life. When I say materialism I mean the matter of the world. There is another trip up in it which means I will attract abuse as a formalist, who is not interested in the processes of the world, but only the substance. Marxists will say this even though they are materialists too - who think that the dialectic will bring about a better world.

Better worlds are in the future, is what I think: they don't exist. This is the best of all possible worlds because it is the only one. You have to trust in the present to say that. I am positing the impossibility of a split between content and form; they can only coexist.

Generous? I want to think so - but there's one observation I haven't yet come to grips with, which is that allowing emergence is to favour the strong over the weak. In human societies where value is overwrought, it might be so I think. In evolutionary terms, no one knows what will survive, that depends on changing wilderness conditions. You remember the WH Auden quote I gave you before - 'the sea values nothing because it misuses nothing. Man overvalues everything, and when he realises the cost is pegged to his own valuation, complains he is being ruined.' (e.g. house prices in UK! Did you manage to get that flat in Berlin?)

claudia says:

On materialism, I don't see a contradiction here. All Marx essentially says, is that the natural substances, added to by human labour make out what we have. It is as simple as that. All the rest is interpretation, exploitation of the idea. The sea remembers/values nothing, but we do. Who do you think is pushing the knowledge and understanding today?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

Okay - this refers to something at the beginning of this interview. It's not quite that art has nothing to say because it's full of science and philosophy - that's part of the critic's problem. I think science, philosophy and art are all busy trying to understand the world as it evolves, which is why they all continuously renew themselves. It seems to me that sometimes one enquiry is dominant over the others; philosophy as theology used to dominate art and science, perhaps now it is that science seems to produce the most interesting propositions. Relativity in science is more interesting I think than relationism in philosophy because it does point to an actual reality, but says we can never observe it; whereas the philosophy tends to conclude that no actual world exists. And then there's quantum physics and astrophysics - all sub perceptual. Art was dominant once, apparently, when people drew animals on rock walls back in the age of magic, and I wouldn't be the first to suggest that the new science may be another magic. Disciplines? Maybe here. Deleuze describes very interestingly the difference in the modes of operation of art, science and philosophy - and adds logic as a fourth. Oh god, and there's global warming - is that science, too? Or commerce, spotting a new opportunity?

claudia says:

What do you identify yourself as? Architect? Philosopher? Writer? Scientist?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

At the moment I am an artist! One who writes. This is weirder than it sounds, because of the way words and writing are embedded everywhere in human activities. There is always the possibility that one is writing a technical manual of some sort. How To Like Everything? Poets are used to calling themselves artists, but writers usually settle for 'thinkers', don't they. I am an artist.

claudia says:

Sorry to have missed the obvious one out. That is great, so you are among us. That brings me right back to the realms of Huntly. Did you find it different to kick off the book here rather than back in London?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

I think this is connected. I remember concluding when I withdrew from being a professional architect that the difference between being a professional and an artist (call it amateur, the lover of what he does) is that professionals can switch on and off, because they work with procedures, not inspiration. It's not such a fashionable view (romantic!) amongst today's **practice** artists - but it works for me. I was finding it very difficult to switch on and off in my busy life in London, so Huntly was a chance to engage in some concentrated inspiration. Not isolation - but the chance to work non stop. The silence and the burgeoning spring was a great background to this. I had a lot of material gathered when I came up to Huntly, so it was really a question of trying to get it organised, massed in a shape. Now I'm back in London everyone thinks I'm still away so life is not busy and I am finding it possible to continue. Sorry, that answer was a bit clumsy. I need to add that Huntly - or rather Bridge of Isla - was an illuminatingly different place to work in, not culturally but environmentally. Silence, and Spring
You don't feel the Spring in the same way in the city.

claudia says:

Do you believe in the possibility of empty-ing your head, like **a emptying** your stomach to kick-start a new thing? Is that possible in your world of the present only?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

That's a good one. I think it's more the possibility of standing still, the better to catch it all. A do-it-yourself lesson: if you're screwing a screw into a wall from the top of a ladder and the screw drops out of your hands, don't try to catch it, you'll lose it forever. Stand still and watch where it falls, then you can find it again.

claudia says:

Ok, let me finish by taking the metaphor of the falling nail for your book. What will be the style of the book? What is the anticipated readership and what should they take away with them?

paul@paulshepheard.com says:

Do you recognise the term anatomical novel? A simple spring is used to attempt to describe a complex world. How to like everything is the technical manual side of it, a challenge to the habits of opposition, humanism and idealism with which actions are framed. It's set in the context of the problem of being different; Felix figures quite a lot, and frames it as a novel. As Gertrude Stein used to say, I'm writing for myself and strangers - it's a book I'd buy if I saw it out there; I really think this needs doing. I want it to be read as fiction, though, a freighted fiction. And it is about something - the present.

We're finishing - this has been very interesting and very helpful. Thanks.

claudia says:

Thank you Paul, it has been a pleasure.