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An Interview with Allan Graham

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BRENDAN CONNELL

Allan Graham was born in 1943 in San Francisco, California, and later moved to New Mexico, where he has lived for most of his adult life, exhibiting continuously at both galleries and museums, from Santa Fe to New York to Switzerland and Italy.

His works are in several major collections, both private and public, noteworthy among them being that of the Villa Menafoglio Litta Panza, a public space created by the collector Panza de Biumo in Verese, Italy, with the organisation FAI.

"Non-conceptual." This is the first word that comes to my mind when confronted with the work of Graham. His art is not so much the art of the idea, as the art of what the idea indicates and what it cannot possibly say — visually or verbally. Whether it be the two bronze coffee mugs sitting alone in an empty room (*TIDE: two ideas defining emptiness*), the word-groups pasted as bumper stickers on vintage automobile bumpers (*Toadhouse*), or the wooden doors painted with a palette knife (*Pre-hung: for those who suffer form*), Graham consistently points to what is on the other side of thoughts and concepts.

Time is Memory, last exhibited at SITE Santa Fe, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is one of his most interesting pieces and consists of, in Graham's own words, "16 death poems by 16 Zen Buddhist masters, 16 zafus (meditation cushions), and 16 reading lights connected to a central hub which is then connected to a solar electric computerized tracker. The poems, zafus and lights form an oval or circle on the floor with the solar electric tracker on the roof of the building. Weather, light shifts, and human consciousness create a sensitive flux to the room's events. Rising with the sun, flowing with the weather, then setting into darkness. The zafus are to be sat on, the poems are to be read, and change to be experienced."

The death poems used in the piece were composed by the various Zen masters just before they died, and are Graham's renderings from various translations that he has read.

The following interview took place toward the end of January, 2003.

BRENDAN CONNELL: A lot of your work, and obviously *Time is Memory* in particular, has what I view as a Zen Buddhist theme. Many contemporary artists use the same type of 'minimalist' aesthetics found in traditional Zen Buddhist art. But do you think,

visually, a piece of artwork can have the same sort of effect as say, a Zen Koan, — an enlightenment effect?

ALLAN GRAHAM: From a Zen standpoint, art is only the pointing finger. Multiplicity, simultaneity, and connections that become too vast for our logic or reason to hold onto have been my "focus" for many years. That is my connection with Zen. But it also occurs in say, Sufi (Rumi), even in the most recent science — a beyond-self comprehension. Physical details in art are just the language. I have no loyalty to a style or subject, but there are reoccurring loops that feel like a part of me, whatever I do.

BC: Not having any loyalty to a style — do you think that that might be a style in itself?

AG: Sure, everything becomes a style if repeated. This one is just a little less predictable.

BC: On a strictly visual level, *Time is Memory* is quite dramatic. Do you want people to have an appreciation of the piece aside from any cultural trappings associated with it? In other words, do you think someone might be able to get something relatively profound out of the work without knowing what it is about?

AG: It is visually compelling, beyond all its esoteric trappings, and drew people to it while at SITE — it had a way of calming people down and getting them to think about all the implications and about their relation to "the big picture."

BC: What do you mean by "the big picture"?

AG: "Big picture" — getting far enough away from your trite self to see the maze of relationships that make everything what and how it is. Humour is a method for gaining momentary distance, as is relaxed reflection, and of course meditation.

BC: You say: "The zafus are to be sat on, the poems are to be read, and change to be experienced." What sort of change?

AG: Actually, I didn't have a didactic idea. I just envisioned a group of experiences that would vary with the light and mood of both the viewer and the piece. Think also about the configuration of the cords. That was a free one for me, as far as symbolism was concerned.

BC: You mean that everyone is hooked into some kind of central, universal nervous system?

AG: Sounds good to me. Holographic perhaps?

BC: Is the title, *Time is Memory*, important to understanding the

piece?

AG: The titles for me are all-important. Without memory we have no awareness of time. If you think about it, there is no awareness of time if you can't detect change, and change is what time is, and you can't detect it if you don't have a memory of what has come before. So it occurred to me that time is memory. That they are the same thing, and that maybe we create it as we perceive it.

BC: *Time is Memory* seems to me to be much more accessible to the general public than some of your other pieces. Do you consider the audience much when you are making a piece?

AG: I always go for the most direct approach to each piece. The whole thing has an availability that allows for a lot of interpretation, and I like that. There's no didactic thing, there is the very direct thing of the sun coming up and the sun going down. It opens up into a very personal interpretation. What is interesting is that some people just stand back against the walls and watch it; and we had a printout, a free hand-out of all the poems, so people would walk away with the poems later, and I'm convinced a lot of people didn't read the poems while they were there. And then there were other people who sat at one place and read the poem for a while and then moved to the next zafu and sat there for awhile, or there would be people who would just read one poem and experience the light change and then take all the poems with them in a print-out and start thinking about them... A group of young children, I would say 9 to 12 years old, who were working with other children who had AIDS or who were HIV positive, came and the whole class sat down together and tried to idealize what writing a death poem was... People came back repeatedly to see this piece. I think the first time is the over-all impression — because it is really quite strong and beautiful visually, all those chords laying in a pile, kind of like spaghetti in the centre, and then each one coming out singly to each light —, so that probably dominates for a while, and then many people come back and start getting involved in the poems.

BC: So, do you think that the idea is, when you sit in each particular place, to try and recreate the experience of that particular Zen master.

AG: It is a nice idea. You're the first person that has formulated it. It is something that I think would come

from someone with more experience in Zen and Buddhism than the average person, who really isn't aware of why these poems were generated.

BC: Your sculptural ideas — your ideas in general — usually have a literary or written element to them. What is that about?

AG: Initially, it was textural in the



ALLAN GRAHAM, *Site, Cups & Moon*, 2000. Detail. SITE Santa Fe. Photo: A. Graham.

physical sense; I used book pages directly on the surface, and I liked the association to the types of books, whether I was using the Bible in Navajo, which was used for a code language during the Second World War, or texts from various poets. The titles of the pieces all related to something that was going on, either in the texts or in the structure of the object, and that became more and more important to me. Then, later, when I started writing my own kind of word-groups, they started actually influencing the visual.

BC: Some of your work — the mugs for example — are, in the visual sense, quite subtle, but conceptually they are a bit of a slap in the face. Do you think visually, there is a certain line of subtlety it is best not to cross over — or do you think anything is fair game?

AG: Yes, I think anything is fair game. I feel that we edit from our personalities. I try not to set restrictions on myself — however successful. The following are two poems from *Time is Memory*:

empty I entered
empty I leave
going and coming
simple things entangled
Kozan Ichikyo, died 1360, age 77,
monk, poet
ill-travelling
my dreams breaking
upon ancient fields
Basho, died 1694, age 51, poet. ←