

The Guided Reach

The creative process and the reach for quality

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The moment I'm most fascinated with in the creative process is the initial spark when a new idea arises. It's the birthing moment where *nothingness* turns into... *something*. The creator follows an instinctual drive that suddenly produces, in very raw form, something new. That moment of discovery is an elusive and powerful one. But from there the new creation, whether it's a painting, song, or even something like a business plan, is either developed into a refined state and becomes something regarded as good, or worked on for a while and then dropped, or maybe it's finished but it just stinks!

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, Michelangelo's *David*, these are works that have survived the test of time and are considered to be of the highest quality. What is it that makes some creations better than others? We can gain some insight by looking at the relationship of form and content. When something moves you, like a wonderfully expressive painting, you are looking at the works form and content in balance with each other.

Form is the shape something takes when it comes into existence. A poem is formed by its words, a painting by its shapes, colors, and hues. Form is defined by boundaries, by what it is and what it isn't. The edge of the brushstroke exists by occupying space. Think of a blank white canvas. In your minds eye, choose a color and paint a single brushstroke on the canvas in any shape you want. Look at it. Its form is obvious. From the nothingness of the blank canvas you have created, through form, a very tangible *something*.

Content is meaning. Does your drawing have obvious meaning? Did you paint a circle? Does it represent the sun? Does it represent the moon? Put 2 dots inside of a circle. Does it now say "human face"? *Content* is both the literal meaning and what is implied, what the lines depict explicitly and where the brush stroke is pointing metaphorically.

I would contend that less-effective works lean towards one side or the other. One extreme is people who have something to say but can't seem to find the voice to say it with. Their form is lacking descriptiveness. It does not hold much meaning or expressiveness. It is an immature voice, one that perhaps has rough edges or is unclear. This artist may have an idea in their head, but until they learn to use form more effectively, their works will not be communicated as fully as they'd like. The other extreme is heavy form with little content or meaning, like a smooth talker who has nothing of substance to say. This person is usually very conventional, a regurgitator who learns to copy the form that others have created.



Here are two examples of form and content in balance: a super bowl ad and a Picasso painting. Advertising is an industry with lots of money changing hands and therefore great incentive for excellence in execution. Think about the creation of a television ad. It's an interesting assignment: you have 30 seconds to influence the viewer and persuade them to purchase your clients product. Super bowl ads have become the cream of the crop in terms of cost and exposure, and have become a big part of the experience of watching the super bowl. These ads often deliver targeted messaging through entertaining, visually captivating vignettes. They can be very impressive creations (although there are plenty of duds, too). I don't enjoy thinking about how much money and effort are being spent on convincing you to drink a certain beer, but I can't help but recognize the effectiveness of the medium when they get it right. Every nuance of the ad has been explored by a creative director, a team of designers, marketing experts, and has been fine tuned to give the most bang for the buck. Effective ads speak through a balance between form and content. The form exists specifically to communicate a very definitive message to a targeted audience.

Compare this to a Picasso cubist painting. Who is the targeted audience? Human beings, I suppose. What is the message behind one of his portraits of a woman, for example? It's hard to say. In a general sense it speaks to the experience of being human. Some examples are more obvious than others: his "Guernica" for example is obviously expressing the experience of war, destruction and despair. You can see here or in examining other works of art, whether they are poetry, music, sculpture or whatever, that form and content can be very specific and/or extremely vague. In either case they have an interrelated connection. One does not exist without the other. This is the dance between form and content.

Even in simple sketches, Picasso, was able to express volumes of meaning. He said this about the importance of content in form:

"A few strokes of a brush that have no meaning will never make a picture. I do this sort of thing myself, and occasionally you might say it was an abstract. But my brushstrokes always signify something; a bull, an arena, the sea, the mountains, the crowd To arrive at abstraction, it is always necessary to begin with a

concrete reality Art is a language of symbols. When I pronounce the word “man,” I call up a picture of man: the word has become the symbol of man. It does not represent him as photography could. Two holes – that’s the symbol for a face, enough to evoke it without representing it. . . . But isn’t it strange that it can be done through such simple means? Two holes; that’s abstract enough if you consider the complexity of man. . . .”(Picasso On Art - A Selection of Views by Dore Ashton. Page 68)

One way to understand great works is to look at not-so-great work. Here we can see how the creator leans too heavily in one way or the other. For example, people who have the priority of being a rock star lean towards form-heavy creations. Tune in American Idol. Contestants often gesture and sculpt their faces with emotional expressions. They do the moves. The ones that are perhaps more impressive are the masters of form. Not having watched more than a few minutes of it I can’t say for sure that there haven’t been some truly remarkable artists emerging from the show, but my guess is that you might think to yourself they look and sound good, but that there’s nothing really special about it. Is this the same for “one-hit-wonders”? That they are in the right place at the right time and have expressive form with the right hook. That hook is what record execs identify and distribute. But the *special* artists like Nina Simone for example, are the ones who have expressive form with content that people connect with and want more of.



Nina Simone



American Idol contestants

There has to be a reason for a works form to be there. If you really want to move someone, you have to tell them something real. That's the difference between Picasso's "The three musicians" and Joe Schmo's "Velvet Elvis." One is an execution of form for forms sake, Elvis looking just the way he should, but not moving the viewer (unless they're a huge Elvis fan, of course). The other expresses a real thought about place, time, and existence *through* its form. Mastering form is not enough. Form *has* to exist to express something real, otherwise it's conventional and boring.



So if we are able to create vibrantly expressive form which exists as a means of communicating honest content, have we created quality?

In his book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig chronicles his pursuit of an understanding of quality. He debates whether quality is objective or subjective and decides that it is neither. He thinks of quality as being "the event at which the subject becomes aware of the object."



Henri Poincare



Robert and Chris Pirsig

Pirsig, referring to himself in the third person and as "Phaedrus", writes:

You can't be aware that you've seen the tree until after you've seen the tree, and between the instant of vision and the instant of awareness there must be a time lag... at the cutting edge of time, before an object can be distinguished, there must be a kind of nonintellectual awareness, which he called awareness of Quality... This preintellectual reality is what Phaedrus felt he had properly identified as quality. Since all intellectually identifiable things must emerge from this preintellectual reality, Quality is the parent, the source of all subjects and objects. (p. 221-222)

So how does this correspond to art? Let's look a little further into Pirsig's "preintellectual" awareness of quality. His thoughts on this matter were influenced by the French mathematician Henri Poincaré, who explored where mathematical insight came from. Poincaré speaks of the "subliminal self," the subconscious mind that processes the vast

array of data it's exposed to at any given moment, and decides what pieces of data to allow to enter the conscious mind. Poincare's "subliminal self" was in effect the same as Pirsig's preintellectual self.

In his book *The Foundations of Science*, Poincare writes:

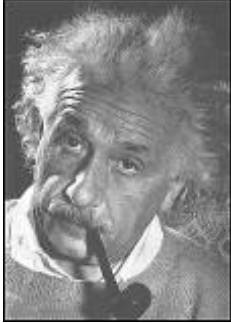
What is the cause that, among the thousand products of our unconscious activity, some are called to pass the threshold, while others remain below? Is it simple chance which confers this privilege? Evidently not; among all the stimuli of our senses, for example, only the most intense fix our attention, unless it has been drawn to them by other causes. More generally the privileged unconscious phenomena, those susceptible of becoming conscious are those which, directly or indirectly, affect most profoundly our emotional sensibility. (p.39-40 from Ghiselin's *The Creative Process*)

Poincare and Pirsig illustrate that in the fleeting present moment, we unconsciously *decide* what we become aware of. Pirsig speaks of a motorcyclist's attention staying on the road and the controls of the bike – all that is vital to a successful ride, as opposed to paying attention to the ground zipping by under the tires. Quality is what passes the threshold into consciousness through an unconscious assessment of usefulness. In the case of making art, it is this same assessment that guides the brush stroke. Something is useful if it expresses what you desire to say.

John Berger writes of the phenomenon of the artist's choice of subject matter in his "Success and Failure of Picasso" page 133

A subject does not start with what is put in front of the easel or with something which the painter happens to remember. A subject starts with the painter deciding he would like to paint such-and-such because for some reason or other he finds it meaningful. A subject begins when the artist selects something for *special mention*. (What makes it special or meaningful may seem to the artist to be purely visual – its colors or its form.) When the subject has been selected, the function of the painting itself is to communicate and justify the significance of that selection.

In regards to his mathematical insights, Poincare explains that they required preliminary conscious work, which generated a sea of possibilities from which the insight later arose. The arrival of the insight occurs after the subliminal self works as a sieve, passing over miles of ocean until quality is found. Poincare describes the quality insight as that piece of data being the most useful, harmonious, or beautiful. It fulfils the need.



Einstein



Mozart

Albert Einstein, writing about the internal, mental images which arose for him with his mathematical insights, described them as being "of visual and... muscular type. Conventional words or other signs have to be sought for laboriously only in a secondary stage..." (p. 43 *The Creative Process*) The common experience with thinkers of every medium is that of a preverbal hunch that they just understand as being of "quality," and which they take away from the experience as something to further explore. Mozart wrote this about his musical ideas: "Whence and how they come, I know not; nor can I force them. Those ideas that please me I retain in memory..." (p. 44 *Creative Process*)

Ghiselin writes:

Creation begins typically with a vague, even confused excitement, some sort of yearning, hunch, or other preverbal intimation of approaching or potential resolution. Stephen Spender's expression is exact: "a dim cloud of an idea which I feel must be condensed into a shower of words." (p.14)

Consider this: Someone hands you some clay. You get lost for a few moments completely absorbed by what you're doing. Regardless of what the finished product looks like, at these moments when you're enjoying the process of shaping the clay with your hands, you are following your internal quality gage. Every decision you make with your hands is based on what you think will be "good". Likewise, when we observe a completed work, the subliminal self seems to act in the same way; as a sieve, or an empirical editor, it allows certain things to enter into the conscious mind and form into opinionated feelings. We have a continuous quality gage happening with each newly lived experience making instantaneous decisions about quality.

There seems to be one objective truth to quality: its usefulness. If in no other way than just advocating survival, quality is seen as a positive, advantageous truth. At its most fundamental level, no matter how it is shaped, it is the useful and good. For one celled organisms a little glucose has more quality than the Moonlight Sonata because it means breakfast and survival, but with a developed sensory ability comes the potential for new ways of experiencing quality, which we continue to explore.



"I like the light."



"I like Dinosaurs."



"Glucose, please"

Every living thing seems to be engaged in the pursuit of quality. It is the driving force behind all of creation and all of life. Just as a leaf turns towards the sun, everything seems to turn towards the useful. You create a new reality in every instant of your life. Sometimes it's of high quality, and other times of poor quality. The challenge that we all face is to be true to our highest potential and create moments of high quality. For the art maker this challenge manifests as the creation of honest content and expressive form while following the hunch of his or her aesthetic sense.

Every artist, every person, has their own idea of quality. This feeling of quality is undeniable and yet it is a truth experienced differently by each of us. When you encounter a work of art, a painting, a new song on the radio, a movie, you immediately have a spontaneous reaction from which an opinion of the works quality is formed. Likewise when you create, you make decisions advancing the creation based on an immediate idea of what would be best. Hinging on perspective, quality is an undeniable feeling concerned with goodness which resides in the fleeting present moment.

Our personal ideas of Quality are what guide us as creators. Whether as an artist, scientist, mathematician, inventor, business worker, you name it – as human beings, the assessment of quality can be thought of as our guide. But where is our decision making leading us? How can we talk about the things we haven't created yet?

As we move into possibility, we try to look into the future. All we can see here is what *might* be, and even less clearly, what might be after that. We see strings of potential possibilities. Since these things and ideas do not exist in actualized form though, they are not fully accessible to us, and loom largely as unknowns before us.



Possibility holds what we long to understand and what we're not yet able to grasp. Embracing it entails leaving what we know and are comfortable with and jumping into the un-lived and the unknown. Some discoveries are far beyond our reach. Others are right before us, but since we can't see them until they're fully actualized, we often look past all the arrows pointing their way and see only what we've already seen. We used to believe the earth was flat but now know it is a globe. What other ideas which we are ignorant of today will come to light over time? We don't know for sure. We crawl to the future, forever holding onto what we already know. As possibility draws the horizon line, we travel towards it inch by inch, creation by creation.

The job of the art-maker is to read possibility, reach out into nothingness, and create a new expression of the human condition. Art exists in many vehicles with many possible intentions. It is the expression of the spectrum of the human psyche. It is celebratory, mourning, reflective, projective, simple and complex. Art-making is an attempt to explain through metaphor that aspect of human experience which transcends tangible language and thought. It is an attempt to express the vastness of life. We do this, I suppose, out of an effort to understand why we are here, why "here" is here, and how we can better enjoy and enrich this experience. Again, it's the journey towards what is useful and good, the guided reach towards quality.

Some things are easily explained and understood. Other things are understood, but not easily explained. We have all had "wordless revelations," those times when you feel something with your whole being but are unable to find the right string of words to express it. Here we see the limits of language. But despite not having the words to define a thought precisely, we're still able to identify with the emotional experience we have at that moment and instinctually understand it in a non verbal way.



We project our thoughts out like scaffolding, following linear, definitive reasoning until we hit the limits of language. Artists read the potential seen here at the edge of the known, and reach. It is a reach into the unformed, into nothingness, a reach held up by convention and what is familiar, and guided by a hunch felt by the artist. This is "the guided reach" of art-making. From here the artist must reach *inward* to find the tools he or she possesses to communicate this new insight. Just how they will use their vocabulary depends on how much of the insight is clearly defined. If we *are* able to use words to

successfully communicate a feeling, we've effectively found the edge of the feeling as well. But some feelings have vague edges, and it is this kind of experience that calls for a vague approach in trying to explain it.

Enter stage left, the metaphor.

The metaphor acts as the artists' most important tool after "the reach." Climbing on the scaffolding of convention, the artist hits the outer limits where language becomes insufficient. Following a preverbal hunch (quality), they reach into possibility, into nothingness, and begin to define a new *something*. Then Einstein's "secondary stage" of laboriously developing "conventional words or other signs" is undergone. This stage of development is interestingly very different for science and art, while being ultimately the same.

Both the artist and scientist are faced with the dilemma of bringing their new insight into actualized form. But while the artist wields the metaphor, the scientist deals only with the clearly defined. Lord Kelvin said "When you measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind; it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely in your thoughts advanced to the state of science." I love that science and art seem to have a very similar process of discovery and development up to the point where one turns towards vague language and the other towards precise language. The common ground they both share is the need to develop some kind of language, whether it's a poem or a mathematical theorem.



Lord Kelvin



Rainer Maria Rilke



Pablo Neruda



Sir Isaac Newton

The greatest tool that humans have is vocabulary. In empowering ourselves to identify and describe, to bring some thing or feeling out of a vagueness or mist and into the defined and the tangible, we have allowed our sight to go past that thing. We have created theories on the relativity of time and space to try to grasp the workings of the universe. We have created paintings that somehow speak to our spirit about being human. We are thinkers who travel down avenues of complex thought pushed along by a desire to comprehend and to create. This is our nature. We spend our lives creating things and ideas, adding to the libraries of information that we ultimately leave for our

children to build on. As Sir Isaac Newton said, “We are standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Our species is continuously seeking out new ways of providing answers and grasping life. But still, in every great new age of discovery and expression there are more questions revealed with every answer. There seems to be an ever moving horizon line of thought and experience that we look and move towards. This is the process of human creation. The clear edge of form is not enough for the human spirit. The vague edge where definition starts to become transparent, where the air becomes thin and a glimpse of the infinite is briefly experienced; this is what we crave as a people. This is where the artist travels when they are focused on their work and I suppose where the scientist gets inspiration to plant a foot hold and develop what becomes the next agreed upon set of conventions. This is the human experience: to reach, and quality is the guide.



Suggested Reading:

American Artists on Art from 1940 – 1980: Ellen H. Johnson

The Creative Process: Brewster Ghiselin

Letters to a Young Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke

Picasso on Art - A Selection of Views: Dore Ashton

The Success and Failure of Picasso: John Berger

Ways of Seeing: John Berger