



## **“PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT – MORAY ARTS CENTRE”**

*Randy Klinger*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Randy Klinger’s personal philosophy of Art prompted both heated debate and appreciative applause from the audience at the Gathering. Here we explore some of the issues he raised in more detail through the following interview recorded by Georgina Coburn at Findhorn on 1<sup>st</sup> December.

This interview reflects Mr Klinger’s personal views and in no way represent the views of the Moray Arts Centre Board.

**GC:** Your ideas about beauty caused quite a reaction.

**RK:** Yes, I think ever since the World War II there has been a negation of beauty and we have grown up with an ever changing sense of what is sophisticated. For instance, a child grows up and loves macaroni cheese, I still love macaroni cheese, but I wouldn’t be caught dead eating it. If I went out with someone to a restaurant and really wanted macaroni cheese I wouldn’t allow myself to order it. So the child realises that I’m not going to be seen as sophisticated, I have to go and enjoy something bitter, sour, or something that is a strange combination. See what I mean?

**GC:** Yes, it’s self censoring all the time.

**RK:** Yes. An individual wants to be sophisticated, they want to grow up and the way of leaving home and leaving Mummy and Daddy, is by saying, “Mummy I’m not going to eat your macaroni cheese anymore, I’m going to go out with my friends and order a salad!”

It is a way of saying I’m moving forward and progressing in my life in a measurable way. But I think something is getting lost.

Getting back to what I was saying before about the war I think that there were such horrible, amazingly terrible things that happened in the war that people somehow couldn’t comprehend or make sense of them. This is hypothetical on my part, there seems to be a global cultural negation of beauty. Having seen these pictures of bodies being JCB’ed into trenches.

**GC:** Things which are still going on in various places all over the world.

**RK:** Yes, with these atrocities I just think something went click and people said we cannot stand beauty, something has changed in us, almost genetically we can't stand beauty. So we are going to take a course of irony and cynicism and call this beauty. This is going to be the replacement for what earlier criteria had been of beauty.

**GC:** Do you think that the artist has a social role though to comment on what's wrong in the world? How do you see the artist's role in terms of the pursuit of beauty?

**RK:** I think the artist is a creator of beauty. The biggest problem I've had with the word beauty is that it really upsets people. I realise what happens in their minds is that they think I mean pretty, that I'm suggesting that we go back to painting pictures of flowers in vases. If I meant pretty I would say pretty. What I am talking about is beauty and beauty for me is something that can bring you to the darkest depths of tragedy but it has an aim and a goal to bring you out to even greater brightness and light at the end, to be upliftment.

**GC:** So it is about range and integrity rather than a narrowly defined concept of what beauty might mean.

**RK:** Yes. For me beauty is something that an individual feels viscerally and causes upliftment, not depression. But that doesn't mean that one might not be taken through incredible tragedy and profundity to get there. I realise that I could very easily be pigeon holed as being a traditionalist wanker and I said this to the group. I think it is actually helpful to use a word like that because it breaks the ice. Artists have learned to look at each other with a very critical eye. It is a competitive thing to say that we don't know what beauty is anymore.

**GC:** But we do know what the art world defines it as.

**RK:** Exactly and will pay for. Like the Scottish Arts Council. That was something I wanted to bring up but didn't have a chance. How much is the art that you're showing us by various presenters driven by individuals or what part of it is being driven by funding, either from the Scottish Arts Council or maybe other groups? My experience of the SAC was very definitive. We support this, what we see you doing, what you're offering with your classes is community art and therefore we won't support it, and I find that really questionable. I think a lot of the things that we saw being presented by individuals at the conference were dependent on funding from public money. I would like to bring this up (in a wider context) but I'm not sure how to do so.

For instance I went to an exhibition that was rated number two in the nation by "The Independent". It was very barren and conceptual. There was one room where at first you

walked in and couldn't see anything and then you saw in the corner two cheap plastic drinking cups turned upside down glued to the floor and under each one was a dead fly. That was the entire room. I was then approached by a woman doing a survey. The gallery was empty there was no one there, yet right outside there was a full café. I said to the woman doing the survey;

“How do you feel as a Scot knowing that public money has gone to pay for this exhibition that nobody is enjoying or attending?”

I think she was quite taken aback by this. I understand that the SAC has to come up with their own criteria. But I think it would be interesting to have that publicly discussed somehow.

**GC:** And perhaps to have support for a range of practice, not just concept or ideas based practice but perhaps to have the act of creating work actively supported in our society.

**RK:** It feels like there are two ends of a polar spectrum and what I'm saying is, no, there's quite a lot in between. Personally I'm interested in observation of nature and interestingly enough when you look at history going back till at least 500BC if not a bit earlier you see the sine curve of art history in terms of having classical and anticlassical ages. The Art Historian, Gombrich talked about this. Rather than calling things 'Baroque', 'Rococo' or 'Renaissance' just look at history as being a sine curve of ups and downs, of troughs and highs, the highs being classical ages and the lows anti classical ages. If you do that then I would like to ask the question of where are we on this sine curve. When you do look back at these (classical with a small 'c') periods you do notice that what happened at those times was a focus on the observation of nature. When I say nature I just mean everything of the visual, optical world and less of a focus on copying previous artists. When you look at the anticlassical ages there's much more of a focus on formulae and looking at what artists have already provided.

**GC:** So being caught in the past? Being unable to look to a future almost?

**RK:** The thing is I feel it is a radical thing to say, to really go back that far and look at these sine curves. To say objectively these are classical and anti classical ages and these are the qualities thereof: timelessness, harmony, potential for motion.

**GC:** When you say harmony do you mean harmony in resolution? Perhaps going through a tumultuous movement, like the resolution in music?

**RK:** Yes exactly. I said this at my presentation I have no answers I just have questions and these are the questions that really excite me and I want to bring to other people. I want to have debates and discussions. I want to have a week-long festival in the Arts Centre (Moray Arts Centre at Findhorn Park due to open in April 2007.) called "Beauty".

I want people to come and say, 'I hate what you stand for and I want something that's new' and I'll say, 'OK do we have any criteria?' 'Do we have shared criteria in our time?' It seems to me that the only shared criteria we have is newness. Is that true and if it's true, is that enough? In my class we've spent weeks talking while drawing and the things we did end up having as shared criteria were: subtlety and nuance, clarity of form, clarity of thought and transcendence. Now those things could mean so many different things.

**GC:** Yes they are not narrow definitions by their very nature.

**RK:** The reason why I think that there was such a strong response at the conference, just like this one woman who approached me and said "We all wanted to say that, but are too afraid". To me what I heard was: I live a challenging life that is sometimes filled with pain, grief, difficulty and depression. I look to the arts as a way out of that, to go above the clouds as it were of sadness, discontent and disappointment and at least momentarily to say: my body is exhilarated, my mind is uplifted, my soul is magnified. It is a physical sensation, an aesthetic orgasm. It sounds like a tasteless thing to say but I wanted to get the point across to people that once you had had this experience you couldn't go back from it. It became part of your foundations of what you understood in experience of what beauty is. It is always an upward movement. So why someone could have this experience of aesthetic orgasm and then choose something which brings them down to depression? That is a basic question I want to ask. I think we have decided in the period since World War II that the depression aesthetic is what we want.

**GC:** Why do you think that is?

**RK:** Two things. The atrocities of the war are something that we haven't really processed and assimilated in a way that we can say. 'OK we're done with that and we actually want something uplifting', the other thing is the macaroni cheese syndrome that says: how can I call myself a sophisticated artist, how can I call myself a progressive adult if I still want to eat macaroni cheese? If I keep going back to look at impressionist painting, that kind of eye candy, how I can like myself and take myself seriously? No, I've got to do, create something harsh. If I'm a dancer and I've been trained to know what the human body can do, I can gracefully raise my leg to touch my ear I'm not going to show that. I'm going to shave my hair off, get a troupe of dancers together, paint them blue and have them walk up and down grid lines endlessly. As a statement of: Well, we can gracefully raise our legs to our ears but that's the equivalent of impressionist pap.

Basically to me the gift of life is life, you've been given something to enjoy and that is your task.

**GC:** Do you see that as a responsibility?

**RK:** Yes I think it is. I can very easily say life is hard, life is difficult, people will disappoint you, love is a joke, get pleasure while you can because it's not going to last.

**GC:** It's too easy, it's momentary as well.

**RK:** Yes

**GC:** It also translates to the kind of artistic experience which is engaging for 30 seconds and then you don't remember it. How do you think people can stop looking outwards for validation and start to have that from within?

**RK:** I think that's easy. Just have an aesthetic orgasm! (Laughing)

I work with people in a very open and encouraging way. I get people to feel free to say what they really mean without being demeaned and laughed at. When I have a student who is getting an artist's block, I just say: up the pleasure. What do you love? What do you love in your life? Think of someone or something you adore and make a picture of it.

Why do we have this depression aesthetic that says actually its cooler to be in that depression aesthetic?

I found it incredibly interesting at the conference listening to the presenters and responses from the audience. There may be other people who heard it differently, but what I heard when the two artists doing conceptually-based art spoke, there was a particular response from the audience. What I heard was an immediate laughter as soon as they revealed the ironic content in it, although they did not use the word ironic.

What I heard was a reaction that was a high-chest reaction, that said: I need to laugh at this because if I laugh at it, in an audible laugh, that says to those around me and my society that I get it. I don't want to be left out, I don't want people to notice that I don't get it. Therefore I've created a community around me. There's something about being at the 'cutting-edge'; what it comes down to is kind of survival-based instinct. I won't survive unless I'm in with this group of people.

**GC:** It's about belonging.

**RK:** The response that I got when I barked at the audience, this one man said, 'Well I don't like this word beauty, it irritates me', and I said, " I know it irritates you and I'm going to take that role as an irritant. I don't know what beauty is, I don't know the vastness of what beauty can be but I'm going to stand for that word." I barked at the audience and said "Beauty! Beauty! Beauty!"

**GC:** And they applauded.

**RK:** Yes, it was a very different feeling, like coming from the belly rather than the chest.

I so much wanted to say, “What was that?” I think the desire to understand comes after a visceral experience. I see that there are these polar positions people fall into. It’s the avante garde versus the traditional. Mozart wrote a letter to his Father about three concertos he had just written, he said:

“They are exactly between too hard and too easy. Very brilliant, pleasing to the ear, naturally lasting without emptiness, here and there only connoisseurs will find satisfaction, but in such a way that even non connoisseurs must feel content without knowing why. Say what you will that middle position, the true one in all things, is no longer esteemed. In order to gain praise you have to do things which are so easy to understand that any coachman could sing them at once or so unintelligible that they please precisely because no sensible person can understand them”.

What I would like to do is to say to individuals is: meet a work of art with the visceral, your guts, and then say, ‘Does this attract me or repulse me?’ Ask yourself why? It is about providing people with a doorway that allows people to enliven their imaginations, wherever that goes.

**GC:** Also giving people permission to cross the threshold.

**RK:** The emotional-physical engagement has to be there in order to create a reason to go further, to be curious and study. Why are words like ‘beauty’, ‘tradition’ and ‘history’ considered dirty words? I came from New York City, and from the neighbourhood where the Abstract Expressionists lived in the 1950’s, interestingly most of them killed themselves! I grew up in a time (the 50’s and 60’s) that hit Britain more in the 1970’s that basically said: we’re starting from nothing, creativity comes from me alone,- actually an idea originated in the Romantic period. That became depression aesthetic. People do not like to talk about happiness or joy. Art is love made manifest. If we allowed ourselves as a culture to drop the taste for bitter food we could say that it is not uncool to be loved. I realised that cool is a temperature. People who are cool are self sustaining they do not need anyone or anything.

**GC:** And are completely disconnected from everything around them that matters.

**RK:** What I want to do is raise a flag and say, “WARM!” Warm is the new black! I am still afraid about how this will be interpreted as something incredibly stupid and backward.

It seems to me that until business releases its claws on art I don’t think beauty will emerge and that art will be able to move to its next form. I still think business is

important though. People who we hold in positions of authority, who are these people and how did they get there?

**GC:** Do you think there's too much of an acceptance culturally of authority in this country?

**RK:** That's why I say: come back to the visceral. Once you train people reclaim the visceral reaction, people like Saatchi have no more power. I could come to you and say: this is a great work of art, the artist's last work sold for a million, don't you think it's great? If you've had an aesthetic orgasm you'll say, 'Sorry it doesn't do anything for me, I don't care that it's worth a million.' What I want to do is work with people so that they can have a visceral reaction to art that no one else can have authority over.

**GC:** Is that the ultimate curator's tool then, the visceral reaction?

**RK:** I think it is the point at which you begin. I would like to ask the question of: why people are consciously choosing things that bring them down on a much wider level. Why are we going home and watching Big Brother? I would like us to come together as a culture and ask do I want to accept in my life that the highest quality of television viewing is Big Brother.

**GC:** As celebrating mediocrity.

**RK:** Yes Exactly. I don't want to be in the position of making judgements: this is good or this is bad. I have had this physical experience of art throughout my life. I want to share it with others so that they become the authority in their lives so that they create the foundation of what they know beauty is for them.

**GC:** It's an empowering idea.

**RK:** What are we adding to the world? The world is full of possibilities. To me the most wonderful thing one person can give another is something that enlivens and opens a doorway to their imagination. The opening of the Moray Arts Centre is going to be about stories as the impulse behind all the Arts. I want to call an end to Postmodernism which to me has always been about pastiche and contentlessness. Beauty to me is astounding, it is about awe. Think of "King Lear", to me that's beautiful, it is tragic but brings you out through tension and counterpoint.

**GC:** There's something sublime about that.

**RK:** Yes. I would love to have discussions about this. What does it mean for us?

I don't want to come out with an answer. I only have questions. How can we reassess and take things forward? I want to approach a work of art with my belly first.

**GC:** Do you think artists have to unlearn what they've been taught?

**RK:** Yes. You have to be as a child. I would like people to feel that they are the authority for themselves. Who are we creating art for? I think we have to start with the notion that we are creating it for ourselves. The more we please ourselves the more we please others because if you're trying to make something to please someone else the power of your self isn't there.

**GC:** Greater self determination.

**RK:** I'm standing for what I believe is what we need, for the sine curve turning upwards again, the next golden age. I want to propel that in thought and deed. I don't want to live with cow's heads in formaldehyde, you can't eat formaldehyde. I want something that really feeds me.

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***Randy Klinger***

The Moray Art Centre project is the inspiration of New Yorker Randy Klinger who has been teaching the visual arts at Findhorn since 1992. He has been envisioning the Moray Arts Centre as a place where artist and teacher alike can engage with natural beauty and take refuge from the pressures of the art marketplace.

The concept of Moray Art Centre is of a place where visual artists will be able to connect with teachers from many different artistic disciplines in cross-pollinating environment where inspiration is drawn from the worlds of music, dance, theatre, art history, literature, poetry, sculpture and crafts.

In contrast with most art schools the concept of the Arts Centre is to provide a curriculum uniquely structured to help students achieve their best potential through organic growth in their experience of creativity.

Randy Klinger is an Honours graduate from the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Art and Science (1978) in New York City and is the Coordinator of the project. He has been exhibiting his art work since 1978 in New York, London, Ayr, St Andrews, Germany and Italy.