IKEBANA ASYMMETRY & THE MIND
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GENEROSITY

How do you as an artist or writer compose a work that is generous?

How do you place a group of rocks together in a garden — or branches, berries and blossoms together in ikebana — or ideas and language next to each other on a page — to invite real participation?

The artist is giving a gift, I think, if she leaves some of the connections unfinished.

Implied. The artist is giving a gift, I think, when the composition is multifaceted, offering a multitude of elements that combine in an abundance of ways.

While much of Western art and writing has one clear, main point — unambiguous and decisive — much of East Asian art and poetry is more full of potential. It does not force a particular interpretation, nor does it reveal all its secrets in a single viewing. The mind is refreshed and energized. And we feel invited inside.

It’s asymmetry that does this. Since each combination of any two parts suggests its own meaning, its own interest and power, asymmetry invites participation in the fertile process of creation.
JUXTAPOSITIONS

Arrangement:

Lying fallen on the ground, a broken, russet-red pomegranate spills open its seeds, drawing your attention down. The drama of death and decay. Above, jutting up and to the right, a woody branch. A smattering of tiny, apple green leaves clamber up it. From the center of the collage, deep among the shiny-leafed foliage, a brilliant, borscht-red blossom peers out, intense and unapologetic, yet shadowed by the plenteous verdure. And, then, like a crown, trending gently up, a feathery spray of bright white carnations moves the eyes leftwards, up, and out.

Arrangement:

A vast watery world. On the left, a solitary brown lotus seedpod, old, withered, bent over. In front, two violet lilies. A few low water plants sketch out a theater for the expanse of empty space extending out across the water. Far on the right, huge, a gnarled chunk of wood with root and peeling bark sits heavy and wizened, solid in the lake. Above this, intense lush green conifers, densely opaque, thrust outward and up and over, defining the empty space into the sky. And, on the farthest margin, on the right and in front, minuscule pink budlets, tiny and clustered, break over the edge like the spray of a wave, and scatter their benediction beyond the frame.

FOR THE PLAY OF THE IMAGINATION

What is the connection between asymmetry and generosity? How does placing two dissimilar things against each other cause not only disjuncture but also a feeling of space?

In The Book of Tea, a beautifully written work published in 1906, painter, writer and museum curator Okakura Kakuzo writes:

_The tearoom is an “Abode of the Unsymmetrical” inasmuch as it is consecrated to the worship of the Imperfect, purposely leaving something unfinished for the play of the imagination to complete._

In the tearoom, in Chinese scroll paintings, in the arrangement of rocks in a traditional Japanese garden, in ikebana and in the development and organization of a beautiful essay, asymmetry provokes the viewer’s eyes to move about the piece.
As Okakura writes:

*The dynamic nature of the Zen and Taoist philosophy laid more stress upon the process through which perfection was sought than upon perfection itself. True beauty could be discovered only by one who mentally completed the incomplete.*

Asymmetry allows us to hint at something which is difficult to communicate in a straightforward manner, at an idea that can only be grasped from the side.

Okakura Kakuzo again:

*In the tearoom it is left for each guest in imagination to complete the total effect in relation to himself. The art of the extreme Orient has purposely avoided the symmetrical as expressing not only completion, but also repetition. Uniformity of design was considered as fatal to the freshness of imagination.*

**EMPTY SPACE IS A PLACE TO THINK**

**NEITHER SAME NOR OPPOSITE: ASYMMETRY DEFINED**

Symmetrical structures are evenly divisible. When bisected, they are of equal weight on either side. Although there may be a commonplace harmony to this, they are complete in themselves and static.

In asymmetrical art or design, however, there is a differential of number or size or proportion. A lot of one thing, and a little of another. Elements clustered here, and not over there.

Asymmetry is a counterpositioning of dissimilar —
but not opposite — types. Although “plenty” and “scarcity” could be thought of as opposites, looking closer, the relationship of a group of seven to a group of three is different entirely from the relationship of white to black. Consider the following juxtapositions:

- The breadth of the lake, and the jump of a fish.
- A cluster of red berries, against a matte-black stone.
- A sweeping symphony of sun-bleached branches against the three purple lilies.
- A thicket of brown winter branches, and a solitary orange seedpod.
- A pile of rose petals scattered on mottled gray sand.

Place things together, and they say something of the world.

Asymmetrical design is a theater defined ... in the space of which ... an object or event ... of a different nature ... is intentionally placed.

INTERACTION

Arrangement:

A long, thin blade of reed arches out into space from behind one huge, yellow-green leaf with multiple palmate fronds. Behind them both, deep in the back, hides a brilliant burgundy tuber-like shoot pointing directly to the sky.

What is the interaction between the big leaf and its slight leftward tilt and the forceful arc of the reed? How does size or color or sheen relate to leaping angular force? In a dry rock garden, what is the interaction between the expanse of the gravel and the grouping of the stones? In the Chinese ink painting, what is the interaction between the massive bleak mountains and the hermit’s tiny thatched roofed hut? What are the points of contact? And what might they say?

THE MOVEMENT OF THE MIND

Asymmetry is connected to the way people communicate, and to the structure of the brain, and to consciousness itself.

The human mind moves from one thing to the next. From synapse to synapse, electric impulses jump, linking one idea to another. They link a scent to a memory, or an emotion to the sound of a dear friend’s voice.

So also, as you read these words, your mind moves along, gluing idea to idea. The flow creates desire, the desire to move forward, and find out what comes next. This sense of anticipation, of wanting to know, is an empty space, an absence, a space felt inside. Similarly, the open areas, the “emptiness” characteristic of most ikebana arrangements
(and almost always absent in the Western bouquet), allows the viewer to connect and reconnect the different elements of branch and blossom and leaf.

WHAT IS EXPECTED, AND WHAT IS NOT

We live our lives in a trance of perception. Voices heard, things seen, “the way things are done:” they sculpt pathways in the brain. Patterns repeat themselves, and the pathways are grooved. It’s difficult to see what we don’t already know. We are steeped in our context, used to our patterns, and so it’s hard to be new.

The abrupt and surprising shift challenges this. It disrupts the pattern of expectations, and it opens a door. Brain cells connect differently, and you think a new thought.

This connection is why asymmetry is so powerful, so important. If totally disparate things... are collaged together... the human brain itself... little by little... is generated anew.

Many people might not necessarily connect the art of botanical sculpture, the ikebana, with neuroscience. In this article, they are equated, and a new connection can be made.

CREATING ABSENCES:
ASYMMETRICAL WRITING

When a person writes something, the sequence of sentences and paragraphs as they appear on the page reflect the movement of her thoughts. But it’s more than reflection.
Writing is creating, and words next to other words make pathways in the brain.

The fascinating thing is that this works backwards as well. You take different chunks of text, intentionally mix them, create new junctures, and new thinking appears.

For example, you are reading. In the middle of a meticulous description of the physical elements of office lighting and the screeching of fax machines, the writer has put a sudden direct question about the purpose of life. The words jump from their context, without transition or link, and energy is released.*

Now you are writing. You mix a narrative story with a dictionary definition, or sensory details with crisp dry assertions, or a proof with a shriek. These things feel “far” from each other, and there is a sense of a gap. The mind begins to form guesses and suppositions. And the synapses connect.

THE MOSAIC OF THE MIND

A newspaper story represents one way of seeing the world. The transcripts of a dream represent another. Each is a different system of understanding, and both of them are true. Placing two concepts together is like drawing a line between points. But collaging two genres . . . the system flies open, and the connections abound.

- A government study, and a myth of creation
- A poem, and an obituary
- Graffiti, and equations
- An analysis, and a confession
- A memo, and a rant

* While calling this kind of writing asymmetrical may be new, the technique is not. In fact Chinese and Japanese poetry and essays have followed similar patterns for centuries. One set form for classical discourse derived originally from Chinese poetry, known in Japanese as ki-sho-ten-ketsu, employs a sudden twist or turn or surprise more than halfway through the text to communicate its message. The form might be outlined as: 1 — To wake the reader up, to acknowledge, 2 — To acknowledge and develop, 3 — To revolve, tumble or shift, 4 — To connect, or tie up.

According to Rutgers University Japanese discourse theorist Senko Maynard, “[In Japanese discourse] the task of the writer is not necessarily to argue, convince and persuade the reader. Rather the task is to stimulate the reader into contemplating an issue that might not have been previously considered by providing a number of observations. The reader is expected to draw his conclusions based on the reading.” See: Principles of Japanese Discourse
“RULES” FOR MAKING ASYMMETRICAL ART OR WRITING

- Overcome linearity
- Juxtapose dissimilar elements without transition or padding
- Create empty space
- Make elements of significantly different volume or size
- Allow chunks to group and regroup by placing them close enough to each other to suggest connections — but not so close as to force them
- Define a “theater” or environment, but do not circumscribe or close it
- Let similarities play with differences — similar things “group” themselves together
- Embrace ambiguity and surprise
- Insert at least one piece that’s barely noticeable
- Prevent the eye from staying fixed
- Leave more space than you think

Like a gnarly branch cascading down from a white glossy vase, these worlds were kept separate, but now they entwine.

With the mixture of genres, asymmetrical systems produce mosaics in the mind. The brain moves around and fills in some spaces, while further openings and gaps are continuously formed. We search for disjuncture, reshuffle the pieces, and the matrix expands.

Clumping two things together that don’t immediately “make sense” — it won’t always work. But asymmetry is about more than just the finished piece. Asymmetry is a process. It’s a technique for thinking. It creates a new brain.

GENEROSITY

The generosity of asymmetry — whether in flowers, in stone, or in ink — is about releasing the need for a “one true meaning” that you must get across. Asymmetrical creations are places where you offer meaning in multiples, conjure new environments, and you let people go.

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