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# Presence and Creation Conversation with Peter Brook

Pedro Pérez-Guillon

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Résumé de l'article

Pedro Pérez-Guillon (Santiago du Chili, 1983), professeur d'art et d'architecture à l'Université Catholique de Temuco (Araucanie), s'est entretenu avec Peter Brook à propos du processus toujours mystérieux de la création artistique. Dans cet échange, où il est largement question de la pensée occidentale sur l'art et la création artistique, mais aussi sur la pensée orientale millénaire et sur la présence de la spiritualité chez l'artiste, Peter Brook fait référence à ses voyages en Orient, où il suivit à peu près le même itinéraire que celui de Georges Gurdjieff, dont il s'inspira pour son film *Rencontres avec des hommes remarquables*. Les expériences et les connaissances acquises au cours de ces différents voyages et séjours, autant que sa démarche d'homme de théâtre et de cinéma, nourrissent cet entretien réalisé dans le cadre de l'Academy of Arts of New York (2016) et publié aujourd'hui pour la première fois grâce à *Sens Public*. La mise au point du texte original en anglais et sa traduction en français et en espagnol a été réalisée par Chantal Waszilewska et Roberto Gac, en collaboration avec Pedro Pérez-Guillon.

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Presence and Creation  
Conversation with Peter Brook

Pérez-Guillon Pedro

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## Résumé

Pedro Pérez-Guillon (Santiago du Chili, 1983), professeur d'art et d'architecture à l'Université Catholique de Temuco (Araucanie), s'est entretenu avec Peter Brook à propos du processus toujours mystérieux de la création artistique. Dans cet échange, où il est largement question de la pensée occidentale sur l'art et la création artistique, mais aussi sur la pensée orientale millénaire et sur la présence de la spiritualité chez l'artiste, Peter Brook fait référence à ses voyages en Orient, où il suivit à peu près le même itinéraire que celui de Georges Gurdjieff, dont il s'inspira pour son film *Rencontres avec des hommes remarquables*. Les expériences et les connaissances acquises au cours de ces différents voyages et séjours, autant que sa démarche d'homme de théâtre et de cinéma, nourrissent cet entretien réalisé dans le cadre de l'Academy of Arts of New York (2016) et publié aujourd'hui pour la première fois grâce à Sens Public. La mise au point du texte original en anglais et sa traduction en français et en espagnol a été réalisée par Chantal Waszilewska et Roberto Gac, en collaboration avec Pedro Pérez-Guillon.

**Mot-clés** : Créativité, spiritualité, Tai chi, Summi-e, Peter Brook, Picasso, Klee, Moore, Asia Society, Georges Gurdjieff

## Abstract

Pedro Pérez-Guillon (Santiago, Chile, 1983), professor of art and architecture at the Catholic University of Temuco (Araucania), interviewed Peter Brook about the mysterious process of artistic creation. In this exchange, which is focused on Western thought on art and artistic creation, but also on millenary Eastern thought and the presence of spirituality in the artist, Peter Brook refers to his travels in the East, where he followed almost the same itinerary as that of Georges Gurdjieff, who inspired his film *Encounters with remarkable men*. The experiences and knowledge acquired during these different trips and stays in the East, as well as his own work on theater and cinema, feed this interview conducted in the framework of the Academy of Arts of New York (2016) and published today for the first time thanks to Sens Public. The adjustment of the original text in English and its translation into French and Spanish was provided by Chantal Waszilewska and Roberto Gac, in collaboration with Pedro Pérez-Guillon.

**Keywords:** Creativity, spirituality, Tai chi, Summi-e, Peter Brook, Picasso, Morandi, Moore, Asia Society, Georges Gurdjieff.

### **Resumen**

Pedro Pérez-Guillon (Santiago de Chile, 1983), profesor de arte y de arquitectura en la Universidad Católica de Temuco (Araucanía), se entrevistó con Peter Brook a propósito del proceso siempre misterioso de la creación artística. En este intercambio, donde es ampliamente cuestión del pensamiento occidental sobre el arte y la creación artística, pero también sobre el pensamiento oriental milenario y la presencia de la espiritualidad en el artista, Peter Brook habla de sus viajes a Oriente, dónde siguió aproximadamente el mismo itinerario que el de Georges Gurdjieff, de quien se inspiró para filmar {Encuentros con hombres notables}. Las experiencias y los conocimientos adquiridos en esos viajes y estadias, tanto como su actividad de hombre de teatro y de cine, alimentan esta entrevista realizada en 2016 en el marco de la Academy of Arts of New York y publicada hoy por primera vez gracias a Sens Public. La adaptación del texto original en inglés y su traducción al francés y al español ha sido realizada por Chantal Waszilewska y Roberto Gac en colaboración con Pedro Pérez-Guillon.

**Palabras clave:** Creatividad, espiritualidad, Tai chi, Summi-e, Peter Brook, Picasso, Morandi, Moore, Asia Society, Georges Gurdjieff.

## *Presence and Creation*

At the beginning of 2016, I went with a group of friends to see “Kamakura, Realism and Spirituality”, a show of Japanese medieval sculptures at the Asia Society of New York. The work exhibited in the show left us all in silence. We all shared the impression that some particular quality, something beyond the form and craft was transmitted through most of the pieces, a kind of silent knowledge, a quiet clarity and openness.

A very particular, very fine and very alive quality was embodied and transmitted through these ancient wooden figures sculpted by Zen Buddhist monks more than a thousand years ago. It seemed to us that maybe something about the quality of presence and devotion of the monks to their craft might have made this possible. After this experience, I became interested in understanding what this particular quality was, and how is it possible for an artist or a piece of art to embody a sense of “Presence”.

Recently, I have had the good fortune to know the theater director Peter Brook<sup>1</sup>, and the opportunity to speak with him about “Presence and Creativity”.

What follows, are some notes from two conversations held on October 2016, in Upstate New York, that Peter Brook generously allowed me to record. (The original interview was much longer than the one being presented here.)

October 22nd, New York :

Pedro

I wanted to talk about *creativity and presence*. *Presence*, as the *quality of life* that can be experienced on both ends of a creative experience. Both as a viewer who contemplates a piece of art, and as an artist as a quality of “being” through which the process of *creation* occurs/happens.

Peter

Yes, I think that the first thing that is quite clear is that “presence” is, in fact, invisible. It is something that we can talk about after we have experienced it, but there isn’t a moment in which you can put your finger on it and say : “Ah!... There is presence”.

It is just like silence. We can’t really talk about silence. We can’t describe it. But when all sorts of obstacles are removed, silence appears by itself.

Now, what is important, for what we are looking for, is that no good artist starts with what today is called “concept”, which means a pattern in your head, and you set up to bring it into the world. That isn’t true. *Concepts are the end result. When something appears, that becomes the concept.* A sculptor for example, looks at a piece of wood. You and I passing by would just see a piece of wood. But he takes his knife, his chisel and begins to work. He knows, and senses, that what he is looking

1. Peter Brook is an English theatre and film director who has been based in France since the early 1970s. He has won multiple Tony and Emmy Awards, a Laurence Olivier Award, the Praemium Imperiale, and the Prix Italia. Known for movies like “Lord of the Flies” (1964), “Marat/Sade” (1967) and “Meetings with remarkable men” (1979) as well as many theater plays, as “Mahabharata”, 1985, and “Battlefield”, his last play that was presented in New York a couple of months ago.

If your mind is full of garbage, if an inspiration came you wouldn’t recognize it anyways. So you have to practice a quiet, empty mind. I gave up the intellect entirely.

— Agnès Martin (Lance 2003)

I don’t really trust ideas, especially good ones. Rather I put my trust in the materials that confront me, because they put me in touch with the unknown.

— Robert Rauschenberg

for is already there. And it is in the act of taking away what is in the way that the form emerges.

In India, there is Ajanta and Ellora<sup>2</sup>, where you see a temple that is not built upwards, like every other temple in the whole world. The people who built the temple started from the top, and they started digging, gradually taking away what was covering the temple – not recreating a temple from the past –, a temple for them that was waiting to be revealed. And gradually, in that process of digging, digging, coming back for months, years of work, all the structure of the great temple is revealed.

Now, whether you say that it is the gods who speak – whether it is religion –, these are all useless philosophical discussions. What we can know, is that this is process that we are talking about.

Pedro

This process of *revealing* is very clear in the examples of subtractive processes. How, do you think, can this *revelation* take place through an additive process? (Which is the case in painting, theater, music, and many other art forms).

Peter

There is a French film about Picasso (Clouzot 1956)<sup>3</sup>. In this film, the director put his camera on the other side of a piece of canvas, and Picasso came onto this side. You can see all the movements of his brushes, and you can see he made a line, and then, because of that line being there, it made him think of adding another one, and because he had added another one, a third one was necessary; and then having the three, he suddenly realized that you didn't need more lines, but just this little half circle here, and then he saw that if those were there, they were calling for this color, and then this color, and you can see the growth. It follows the same principle as baby in the mother's womb: we see how it is gradually developing, and the mother can only discover her baby in the moment that the baby appears in the world, until then nothing but X-ray images and things like that. You can't feel the nature of the baby until the second he comes out.

All of this means that everything depends on something – that is the real thing we can talk about – that is, the quality of the artist.

Bad artists only have ideas, rules, techniques. A better artist, a great artist, is in a state of openness. People give credit to the creators, but creation does not come from the person, creation comes through a person if the preparation and the space is there.

We talk about “space”, “inner space”, “space in that”... If now, for example, you are writing and listening – what is listening? – You are listening with something in you that is making a little space. If you are thinking all the time about the questions you want to ask me, you wouldn't be listening. And I see this when I give an interview, for ins-

I try to paint what I have found and not what I look for. In art, intentions are of little importance.

— Picasso

2. Ajanta and Ellora are one of the largest rock-cut monastery-temple caves complexes in the world. The sites present monuments and artwork of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism from the 2nd century BCE to about 480 or 650 CE and from the 600-1000 CE periods respectively.

To know what you're going to draw, you have to begin drawing.

— Picasso

The painter unfolds that which has not been seen.

— Paul Cezanne

Art does not reflect what is seen... It makes the hidden visible.

— Paul Klee

The way in which truth comes to presence is, according to Heidegger – a state of Disclosure – not an action, but a passion.

— Jaime Labastida (1997)

The idea of revelation might relate to the Heideggerian concept of world disclosure (*Erschlossenheit*), which according to Nikolas Kompridis refers as much to the disclosure of new horizons of meaning as to the disclosure of previously hidden or un-thematized dimensions of meaning.

— Nikolas Kompridis (2011)

3. Picasso has been filmed in another documentary, seven years before, painting in a glass, in “Bezoek aan Picasso” (1949), of the Belgian director Paul Haesaerts.

I think inspiration has to do with creation. The creation of the world, creation of life anyway.

— Agnès Martin (Lance 2003)

Only when he painted did he vanish to become just a hand, a brush, that served a seeing far beyond the normal eye.

— Peter Brook (Segal 2003)

My hand is entirely the implement of a distant sphere. It is not my head that functions but something else, something higher, something somewhere remote. He neither serves nor rules, he transmits. His position is humble and the beauty at the crown is not his own. He is merely a channel.

— Paul Klee

No one can have an idea once he starts really listening.

— John Cage (Sontag 1969)

For Heidegger... Poetry is a way to “listen”, to hear the command of silence, to open to being... Listening not to me but to the logos... From the depths of being comes silence. To hear the silence means, then, to understand the meaning of the logos of the being.

— Jaime Labastida (1997)

tance on television. I see the interviewer is not listening. He is thinking about the next question, even thinking “Am I taking too long, would he have time?” All of those thoughts. But the really good interviewer is really purely listening, and “pure listening”, that is what you can call the “presence of a person”. And this presence can also roll out of me if I am being asked something.

This process is the same in music, and it is the same in the theater. The actor, for example, has his space full of ambitions, fears, excitement, all sorts of things. But the space is not empty, and all that we wish to do is gradually to clear away what is in the way. To create an empty space, full of an emptiness that is vibrating. (Brook 1968)

Pedro

We say silence, and emptiness. But there seems to be something else that is needed for this fine receptiveness to take place, for this living vibration to appear. 'Cause this *silence* that we are talking about, is not any kind of *silence*, I mean there is also a *deaf-mute silence*, an empty space that is infertile.

Peter

Yes, I have written a book called “*There are two silences*”—“*Hay dos silencios*” (1999). The essence of it is that in silence, there are two phases : There is a silence that is death, silence of dirt, dust, stone, dead bones in a cemetery. That is a dead silence. And there is a living silence, which we have encountered, for example in a great cathedral. When you go inside a cathedral you are under the presence of a living silence. Then you can call it God, you can call it Allah, you can call it the Holy Ghost, but that is not what you are looking for. You are looking for the fact that presence takes many forms, because it doesn't take forms. But presence exists in many, many conditions. Here, in the center of this room, it is empty. If you look at it now, there is no life in it, there is a dead emptiness. But if around this table there was a really vibrant group of people, this space would have a living presence.

Pedro

You said that *presence* has no form but it can be transmitted or embodied through many forms. The drama of every art is that although we are called to *presence*, the only tool we have to respond to this call is form (shapes, words, movements, sounds, ideas and so on). How do you think this relation is possible? How can form open a space in itself for *presence* to emerge?

Peter

All forms and objects are practical and they are useful. But they are just a starting point. If I need an empty cup to put tea in it (tea does not call for a cup and the cup itself doesn't call for tea either), but we know that both the cup and the tea are necessary. When the tea is in

If you go into solitude with a silent heart, the silence of creation will speak louder than the tongues of men or angels.

— Thomas Merton(1955)

We become preoccupied with the trivialities most. Leaving an empty space adds another dimension. So you leave a space. And this empty space leaves room for the relationship between oneself and this other vibration to take place. Otherwise, it is impossible to come to anything real.

— William Segal (2003)

As John Cage suggested, there is silence, and then there is silence. That is to say, not all silences are equal. Or, to put it another way, silence is not merely the absence of sound, not simply the recognition or quality of lack. In fact, silence shifts and changes qualitatively according to our openness and sensitivity to it.

— Anthony W. Lee (2009)

It is not enough to seal our lips, we've got to listen to the silence, let it utter to us that which of ourselves we quiet.

— Hugo Mujica (2015)

Silence never ceases to imply its opposite and to demand its presence. Just as there can't be “up” without “down” or “left” without “right”, so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence.

— Susan Sontag [Sontag (1969)

True emptiness does not differ from form.

— Wolkentor Berg (App 1994)

For Bill, all experience was one : sound meant silence, movement was part of stillness. There were no divisions : dividing was just a way of thinking.

— Peter Brook (Segal 2003)

We are aware that the conductor is not really making the music, it is making him - if he is relaxed, open and attuned, then the invisible will take possession of him; through him, it will reach us.

— Peter Brook (1968)

there, I can taste it and I can tell you right away if it has quality or not. Then it is a living experience.

We can say the same about theater. We have a stage that is completely empty, then one person comes on to it, another person comes, a beautiful woman comes from the other corner. A man turns to her and says “hey” — “oiga” — and at that minute something can begin to create itself and either be blocked by a million things or can begin to blossom. And in the same way, with a painter, an actor, a dancer or a musician.

Remember the piano concert the other night?<sup>4</sup> The pianist doesn’t tell himself to make himself present, but it is through years of work, and thought, and understanding how to work with his body and fingers, that through his body came something that became this thing that we call sound. He isn’t calling it. He is in a way looking, listening, making his listening finer, more sensitive. And then, within it, and with our self as well – because we were bringing our presence to his presence – between us, a presence appeared, a presence was born. We didn’t make anything, because presence cannot be made and yet, presence is born continually.

Pedro

This morning, you talked about three things. The Buddha Heads, Giacometti and Henry Moore.

Peter

Yes. It is a hard question, this invisible and undefinable, and yet very real something that we call presence. If we look at sculptures of ancient Buddhas heads, one can see that any beautiful Buddha – that is, a really fine Buddha, sitting perfectly in position – when we look at his face, without any philosophical or scientific explanation, we can see in the stone and feel through the stone that he is breathing. That is just a direct experience that anyone can have. Because with a little imitation Buddha, you see exactly the same lines, the same elements. Even if you compare two photographs, they are identical. And yet it doesn’t breathe, and so the presence is not there. It is as simple as that. There are many, many Buddhas all over the world. With some of those truly beautiful Buddha statues, one can feel a life, a presence, a spirit, a breathing. Those are all different ways of saying the same thing : the Buddha is dead material, but has become living material, because something is in a certain way animating it<sup>5</sup>.

Now, one must come back to the fact that presence is a marvelous theme because it puts us in front of the great *unknown*. But the *unknown* is the most active, positive, miraculous thing. It is something that cannot be grasped with ordinary, everyday language. It cannot be grasped by scientists or philosophers, but very simply every one of us can experience it.

Pedro

I remember having that exact same experience when visiting a show

4. He refers to a piano concert played by Laurence Rosenthal

Inspiration is there all the time for anyone whose mind is not covered over with thoughts, and concerns...Of course we know that an untroubled state of mind can not last, so we say that inspiration comes and goes, but it is there all the time waiting for us to be untroubled again.

— Agnès Martin (2012)

It is my belief that every one of us is a vessel that contains a very great energy which goes unattended... there is something in us that is waiting to be called. And if we attend to it, if we acknowledge it, we will then be in touch with a force that can illuminate.... When one is still and one listens, then one begins to be in touch with this mysterious element which is within each one of us.

— Segal (2003)

Only Silence can reach that dimension of reality that is too deep for words.

— Thomas Merton (Shannon 2000)

The efficacious art work leaves silence in its wake.

— Susan Sontag (1969)

The silence of eternity prepares for a thought beyond thought, which must appear from the perspective of traditional thinking and familiar uses of the mind as no thought at all.

— Susan Sontag (1969)

5. It was an experience comparable to the one I experienced when I noticed the absence of a presence in the body of my deceased grandfather, an experience that impelled my research.

I believe that universal knowledge is everywhere around us... you only have to tune out all the noise around you. In order to do this, you have to exhaust your own system of thinking, and your own energy... When your brain is so tired of working that it can no longer think – that is the moment when liquid knowledge can enter.

— Marina Abramović (Levy 2016)



of ancient Buddhist sculpture some months ago at the Asia Society. And it was the most striking show I have seen. If I was quiet and receptive enough, I could experience the transmission of a certain quality of life, a kind of silent knowledge, a knowledge without words or concepts. I have seen many Buddhas and they don't have this extraordinary *quality*. One can feel that it is maybe related to the *presence* of the monk that makes the sculpture, to his own contact or participation with this living knowledge, with this *living presence*. But it is really something impossible to explain.

Peter

It cannot be explained. And yet, we have something in us that corresponds to this word that no dictionary can tell you – but we know what it means – which is “quality”. Something that has more of that quality and something that has less of that quality. Only living experience can tell us this. And there is no use talking about art, music or theater in any form unless we recognize these different shades of quality. That is essential.

Pedro

We know that this “\*quality of presence\*” is impossible to control or manufacture – there is no possible recipe one can follow to achieve it – but how can you *prepare* for that event to happen?

Peter

You *prepare* like in the kitchen. You have to *prepare* your ingredients, and then you put them on the necessary heat, and something is transformed. If we are artists – again, painters, musicians, actors, performers, dancers, – who care, we are talking about the same thing. There is the first step : young people that want to be dancers, who want to be filmmakers, they go to school and there they learn techniques, information, experience.

If you look at 19th century art, there are beautiful things – like the Van Goghs — when a man's love for sunlight, for certain mountains, and for certain nature comes through — or the Italian artists of the great period of the Renaissance, starting with Giotto, after Giotto we see a real pure — and this we also find in oriental paintings and tapestries – that beautiful care, loving sensitive care, that goes into every detail. For me, one of the great words that we have as a sign, is the word *detail*.

I have seen great connoisseurs looking at painting of the great Italian period, looking at old Rembrandts, looking at the great period of painting of Holland. They say you can actually see the *quality* of the brushwork. Now, you have to be a very sensitive lover of art to be able not only to look at a painting of Rembrandt and feel this, but if you look very closely, you can also feel that *that love and care is not something that lies on the surface*.

Any expression of quality is the result of this relationship between two opposite worlds, between two levels of reality.

— Paul Reynard (2000)

Inspiration is absolutely elusive in the way that it cannot be taught or managed or controlled.

— Agnès Martin (2012)

Everyone discusses my art and pretends to understand, as if it were necessary to understand, when it is simply necessary to love.

— Claude Monet

The essential thing is to work in a state of mind that approaches prayer.

— Matisse

Nothing can be accomplished without love.

— Matisse

Manifesting takes place from Spirit. It doesn't take place from form, from the physical world.

— Picasso

All art schools take their pupils to museums to make copies. And that is very important. The copy of the superficial detail won't have the sense of detail of the brushwork, that needs something way beyond the student's capacity. And beyond that, the love of every detail in the work and in the person which gives a painting that presence that makes us come from all around the world to what you are expressing you saw in your visit to the Buddhist sculpture show.

Presence is a marvelous theme, because we don't need to talk about it too often. As I said, it is invisible, and nobody can define it, but we can feel it, and we can feel it particularly when is not there. If we once felt it, then we know when it is not there.

At a certain point of my life, I was deeply influenced by a book that I read in my early ages of Matila Ghyka, a Romanian lover of art, who wrote a book on what is now still known as the "Golden Section" (Ghyka 1978). This book is purely about proportion. You can see that painters as Leonardo, – or any great Renaissance painter – prepared their canvas with certain lines in order to give a proportion to what they were doing. And then they thereon would paint freely.

We can feel a certain sense of presence there is in numbers and proportion. Certain relations between certain numbers touches one in a deep way. The same can be seen in musical harmonies, because here you can see that within it there is a relation between two and three, and nine, and six, all those which makes the shape and the rhythm. So that is proportion, and proportion leads to presence.

Pedro

There are proportions — as mathematics, as a function of the intellect, calculating, planning, and projecting. And there is also this image that you give of Picasso, feeling, and responding, in the freedom of movement. You can also see this search of free movement without calculation, the feeling of participating in a bigger and natural flow, that we see not only in Picasso and Sumi-e painting, but also in Tai Chi and even in dance and theater. What do you feel can be the search within movement, that is free from the grid of structure and calculation and yet that may be sensitive to the emergence of harmony within itself?

Peter

Yes, of course. All that we are talking about and all this analysis that we are doing is about preparation, student work. It is very important, but it is just preparation.

Every dancer will tell you that, if while they are dancing, they try to think of what was said in the class "do this, don't do that". Then it's gone. The moment is lost. You dance with the joy of freedom. But, somebody watching is touched without knowing it, because there is proportion. We must not even think of it. If it is in you, through your preparation, it will guide you. If it isn't in you, you won't be guided.

I actually see the painting in my mind. But to get from this little tiny painting up to a 5 by 5 foot scale.. Because if you make any mistake in the scale, it doesn't work out...It doesn't look very hard, but it is. How wide four blue bands will be, according to the inspiration. And how much is left for the white bands. It's hard.

— Agnès Martin (Lance 2003)

Even in action, the stillness is always there. The point is that we don't listen to it. It doesn't make any difference what the action is. In the background, in the interior of oneself, there is always this vibration, this energy that can change things ultimately and transform them in an upward direction.

— William Segal (2003)

The more technique you have, the less you have to worry about it. The more technique there is, the less there is.

— Picasso

I never calculate. That is why those who do, calculate so much less accurately than I.. The best calculation is the absence of calculation.

— Picasso

Now you talk about sensitivity. I have seen highly priced artists, painters — highly priced. But you and I, we are not touched. We say “yes, it is pretty good”. They wish to do their best, but inside – the inside that leads the hand, the inside of the eye – that careful, loving, sensitivity is not there, because it is love from where this comes. So you just see the outer shape. Presence, “pure shape,” — can touch you, but you don’t have to try to do this or that. You have to understand, know, learn and work, but when it comes to creating, one must be absolutely free.

But coming back to the two other people that we talked about this morning, Giacometti and Henry Moore.

Giacometti is a wonderful artist that everyone respects. In the museum of Basel, there are two rooms dedicated to his statues – which are all about finely observed human beings, usually in movement – and there is such a quality in the ones, that you see lifting a hand or putting a foot forward, and you can feel the life of that foot moving forward, even though they are not actually moving.

One of the rooms is absolutely exceptional. It is a small room, and there are about ten objects in it, and they are all figures caught, like in a photograph, within a movement. But, the person that put them together in this gallery just placed them so, that you could feel an invisible relationship : that, if there was someone lifting his hand to there, and here on this side, there is someone just taking a step in that direction, the distance between them is just right and as you circulate between these ten or twelve figures, at every moment there is a living flow, not only within the figure, but within them all. I have never seen anywhere an exhibition in a museum or a gallery of that quality, because you felt the presence not only of the object, but something that filled the whole room by something that has only one word : presence.

Pedro

Talking about the possibility of *presence in proportion*, there seems to be a relation like if there was some kind of vibration or tuning that one could do in the relation of things, for creating some note, or resonance in the space<sup>6</sup>. As an architect, this is very evident ; the vibration of space and the different notes that one can create by changing just a little bit the distance, size, or an angle. The whole quality of space is transformed and the effect on our bodies is totally different.

Peter

Exactly, exactly ! It is a tuning. That’s why I have seen that relation in shape and space, that’s why proportion could help. In Bologna, there is the Atelier of Morandi, where they show his last seven or eight years.

In the last period of his life, he was too weak, or too ill to be able to paint. But he had at his table a series of carefully chosen little objects, and he would spend hours and hours doing what for him was an enormous pleasure – moving them to see what would be the most living

People ask me, “Don’t you ever run out of ideas?” In the first place I don’t use ideas. Every time I have an idea it’s too limiting, and usually turns out to be a disappointment. But I haven’t run out of curiosity.

— Robert Rauschenberg

When the thinking is exhausted, then is the time for inspiration.

— Agnès Martin (2012)

If I think, everything is lost.

— Paul Cezanne

The moments of inspiration added together make what we refer to as sensibility defined in the dictionary as “response to higher feelings.” The development of sensibility is the most important thing.

— Agnès Martin (2012)

Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.

— Picasso

6. The different “vibrations” that Agnès Martin can create with arrangements of very subtle distances between parallel lines are an excellent example. This repetition of lines over different distances becomes a visual instrument, generating different notes on the space that one can feel while looking at his paintings.



— Giorgio Morandi, drawing 1958

relationship – just for himself, not to be recorded. And that never ended, there was no conclusion – he was exploring.

Pedro

Morandi is a great example of the fine tuning in painting. All his work is about these little relations of positive and negative spaces, little subtleties in texture, small shifts in tone, hue and value.

Peter

Exactly. But you see, when he couldn't paint any longer he could still explore this endlessly with just a few objects that he loved on his table. And by just moving one, it opened up a whole new set of possibilities (just like what we talked about with Picasso). Day after day, it was never the same, never fixed. But when he found it, the presence was there.

Pedro

Until now, we have been talking about this living vibration of *presence* through detail, through this fine tuning, through subtle care. But for Giacometti, or for many other artists, like the Abstract Expressionist artists *presence* was equally important. Although, these artists were looking for *presence* in a more expressive way, not only through the finer energies that are within us, but also through the “rough” energies, which also need a place, because they are in us, they are in nature.

How do you think both forces can be included in the creative experience? And what do you think is the place for the “rougher” energies, and for that need for expression in relation to what we are talking about?

Peter

Of course, if you are only looking for the fine, it becomes weak.

Pedro

And pretentious.

Peter

Yes, and pretentious and purely aesthetic. The aim is life.

Let's take for example the marvelous paintings of Hopper. Here you see that he brings his own best sensitivity to what he loved : a simple room in a bar with a window. Looking for that whole range, from the rough – the rough being the texture of everyday life – and within it, the light of something that goes through the rough fabric and, like light, gives us a new radiance. Because *Presence* and *Radiance* are inseparable. The *radiance* comes from proportion, from light and shadow, from loving care; and if the artist is too hurried, or he is too pretentious, or if he is too ambitious, (this are natural human characteristics, we are not here to criticize them) but one can see then that the quality of the object is not the same.

Now, let's talk about Henry Moore. We went to visit, with Henry Moore, his studio outside of London. He was working on these large female figures, one of which he had just finished working on. And he told me this simple, beautiful, intimate little words; he said : “You know,

European thought expects no less than happiness and truth from presence, from intimately penetrating it or unveiling it from a distance; it makes the reign of presence coincide with plenitude. Were it only to strike us in a flash, presence would illuminate and fill.

— François Jullien (2009)

So much of every art is an expression of the subconscious that it seems to me most of all the important qualities are put there unconsciously, and little of importance by the conscious intellect.

— Edward Hopper

Luminosity is a reflection of a higher world, which sometimes enters your world and my world through a face, through an apple, through a painting. It is always here, this luminosity, but it's so densely hidden. Luminosity is all around us in everything. The painter, with a certain quality in himself, is able to evoke this on canvas.

— William Segal (2003)

The second big surprise Bill handed me was from his drawings, which aptly got called “transparencies”... The clear light, is just transparency... it is a light that does not fall on objects, but comes from within them, casting no shadows. It is a self-luminous, non-dual awareness and presence.

— Robert Thurman (Segal 2003)

when I am working on this, all the time I am thinking on my mother, whom I loved dearly. Because she had very bad arthritis. She had great pains in her back. So, during the last years of her life, I would go to see her, and she would ask me to take the creams that were made for her, and rub them gently into her back. And I would always do it. So when I work on the back of a woman, I remember that feeling of touching, with love, my mother's back." He said this from the heart. And if you look at the sculpture from the front, it was one thing, from the side another, and then, when you saw the back, you could see that the back was like the face of Buddha : it was alive.

Pedro

Talking about Henry Moore, if you compare his treatment of form with Michelangelo, for example, or with Rodin, or Anish Kapoor, you can see a certain kind of evolution of forms throughout history. While we have probably all been trying to talk about the same thing – the same human questions and experiences – , we have done it through radically different forms. How do you see this “*historicity* of form” ?

Peter

Form is number two. As simple as that. And this is the terrible thing in universities and art schools. Which start with form.

What we are looking for (always with the help of form) is to see what illuminates it. And we would see that what illuminates form takes on a value. If we are listening and following life, life is in movement all the time, and form changes all the time. So, every great artist of every great period is aware of the constant changing forms of life. This is why, for contemporary painters and musicians, writing music in the style and form of Stravinsky or Bach does not make any sense. Those were forms that were very right for their period, and after everyone follows this, and calls it “art history”. But then, comes a time (and Picasso was the best example in our time) when someone feels “No, we can't go on today doing these naturalistic as we have for fifty years. There is something new to be revealed. Let's try to find the form for it.” And one sees – Picasso is the best example – developing and looking all his life, and in his work, throughout his career, as his form changing throughout his lifetime all the time. Not because he wanted to change the forms, but because life was changing around him.

Pedro

If you had a group of people, like what you do in theater, to search a new way of painting. You are there, confronted with a white canvas. How would you approach this quest ?

Peter

Very very simple. Everything comes back to very simple words that we learnt when we were children : “Trial and error”, what we call the *rehearsal process*. Everything that I am opposed to — which is what I

I think one's art goes as far and as deep as one's love goes.  
— Andrew Wyeth

The purpose of art, I believe, is to reveal the existence of a different level of reality, a reality that is beyond form.  
— Paul Reynard (2000)

The different styles I have been using in my art must not be seen as an evolution, or as steps towards an unknown ideal of painting. Everything I have ever made was made for the present and with the hope that it would always remain in the present.  
— Picasso

Don't try to be original. Be simple... and if there is something in you, it will come out.  
— Matisse

Variation does not mean evolution. If an artist varies his mode of expression this only means that he has changed his manner of thinking.  
— Picasso

call “deadly” theatre — a director arrives on set after having worked out in detail, what everything must be. The director and his assistant say to the actors : “Alright now you get up on this line, you cross over there, you sit on the table. And a light will suddenly come through that window”... For me, a director and the group of actors must prepare. They have to prepare the instrument, prepare the body, doing exercises. But what is most important is to try and to be ready to say : “I have tried it and it’s no good. We must look again”. Nothing of that is wasted, it is a process of trial and error.

People have seen in my work what they call simplicity. And I have warned every young person : “If you start with simplicity, you will get nowhere”, you have to go through this process of trial and error, and elimination. And then what is left..., is just like preparing something in the kitchen, you get rid of what becomes rubbish until you are left with something of fine taste.

Now, if you see – and this is the most important thing for your work – that presence is a by-product. Presence, for all we have talked about, is always a potential, but it won’t arise unless all the conditions are right. But if you start by saying “what we need is to find presence”, then you have no chance.

Pedro

One can see that *it is not possible to control the appearance of presence* in our work, we can not “manufacture presence.” So we are left there, alone, with no tools, in front of our *lack of openness*, our *lack of sensitivity*, in a total *nullity* to respond to this call for participating of something higher than our personal limitations and subjectivities...

Peter (interrupting)

Yes, but wait. Because everything is, only in relation to something else – other ways, your self-criticism is meaningless. So what has to be there, developed over and over again, is a *sense of quality*.

You make a gesture, whether you are an actor or a painter, and then you look at it and you say : “Yes, that is the idea, but the quality is not there”. And you start again.

The pianist has to do exercises. He is not looking for something magical or mysterious. He is just looking to recognize – as he plays and as he listens – something in terms of quality, of a “pure quality”, of a better quality, of a finer quality. Because there is always in us, a very intimate sense – like a call – that there is a better quality.

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Paintings are but research and experiment. I never do a painting as a work of art. All of them are researches. I search constantly and there is a logical sequence in all this research.

— Picasso

Art is the elimination of the unnecessary.

— Picasso

When I was looking for truth, I found out that the best way was, just look around, and you don’t see anything. But just be in the mood for truth. It is a happy state of mind, very small happiness. And you stay alert, and you don’t see anything. But you stay alert. And then it just comes into your mind.

— Agnès Martin (Lance 2003)

Through continuing to paint, there will come a moment where there is an opening which can teach what I cannot speak about. As if one suddenly knows something – maybe not much – but you know something that you didn’t know before.

— William Segal (2003)

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