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J.W. Stewart Analogues and Anagrams

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[See table of contents](#)

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VISITES D'ATELIER

J.W. Stewart *Analogues and Anagrams*



J.W. Stewart, *Mask*, 1987. Mixed media assemblage;
151 x 113 cm. Photo : Andrew Blanchard

Allan Pringle : John, since my introduction to your work in 1983 I've followed your career with great interest. Through your shows at Waddington & Gorge and the various group exhibitions you have participated in, I have observed your preoccupation with the relationship between word and image and an abiding concern for the nature of symbol and metaphor. I have also witnessed a general move towards a more purely visual, more painterly approach, while maintaining your concern with the verbal, paraliterary aspects of

the work. I would like to touch upon what might be read as a dichotomy between plastic values and the written mode. Perhaps we should lay a little groundwork, begin at the beginning with Cornell and Rauschenberg, I believe, and with poetry ?

J.W. Stewart : Joseph Cornell is certainly someone whose work I looked at early on to see how existing images had been assimilated and incorporated into art work. But, I haven't used Cornell's work so much as a model for my imagery although we do share some of



J.W. Stewart, *Paraclete #VII, Oracle*, 1988.
Mixed media assemblage on paper support; 79 x 107 cm. Photo : Andrew Blanchard

the same imagery. Cornell *did* the box. My pieces are generally framed under glass and I have used the impression of a specimen case as a feature of my work.

A.P. : *Like a museum case ?*

J.W.S. : Right, in order to get the implication of something that was not necessarily made but was found, a specimen. If you go to the museum of Natural Science in New York you see these things. I was interested in making artifacts or rather forgeries of relics, manuscript pages, etc. whose provenance has been lost. At the museum, if you don't read the cards you can make up wonderful fictions. This brings to mind a writer called Donald Barthelme who in some of his earlier pieces conducted absurdist exercises making up stories surrounding existing engravings. Now, as far as Cornell is concerned, he deals with a more personalized view of the world, whereas I don't feel that my pieces are so subjectively grounded. I was trying to simulate objects whose nature, as artifacts, was essentially objective. Rauschenberg is another important early model in the sense that I felt it was something to work against. It was a deliberate decision on my part to change the orientation of my work from abstract painting to collage and montage, a complete break. Rauschenberg, I think, was the king of montage; most of what was being done derived from his work. He indulged himself in a very oblique referential process that was really quite raw. One of his great concerns was to underline the ability of common place materials, *matière*, to carry a freight of meaning. In 1980, when I was getting into this work, I wanted to work against that because I felt that Rauschenberg had done it already, and that he owned it. I wanted to find a way to break out of that sense of rawness. I wanted to fit the elements much more smoothly into their context. I tried to make my work more finished. In artistic practice in general, in the Western world, rawness has come to be equated with honesty. If the basic precepts of a way of working prescribe a finished look, I think it is seen as corrupt. But I think it is a value that is less and less relevant, the tendency to rawness has become a reflex. It's the work itself that will dictate what is necessary rather than any external conventions.

A.P. : *So you see Cornell and Rauschenberg as things to work against as much as influences. What other artists have influenced you in this way ?*

J.W.S. : To be influenced or even to work against influences, I think, honours these artists because it implies an appreciation, at least on the level of your work, of what these artists have done. Other artists whose work has been very important to me are Arakawa, Dennis Oppenheim's factories, Arman, Leonardo da Vinci is a wonderful mine of material for me, and of course Duchamp.

A.P. : *Duchamp, hence your interest in word and poetry ?*

J.W.S. : Yes, Arakawa also did riddles.

A.P. : *Do you offer your work as puzzles for the observer to solve then ?*

J.W.S. : I don't see it so much as a puzzle as a little bit like an interview. The piece interviews the person who looks at it. It throws things out and waits for a reaction. It's up to the viewer to make their version of the picture just as it is up to everybody to make their version of the world. My system of arriving at central features of a work is driven by what I consider to be of interest. I accumulate, note, sketch a lot of basic images with the intention of working them into, or I could say, up to being the core of a piece. But only a few ever make it, that is, get used. It simply depends on what resonates, seems strong to me, so this is a natural winnowing process. (...) The man on the street is able to assimilate symbols, in a broad sense, in a relatively consistent way in our society. And indeed the symbols that are used in a given society also crop up in other societies throughout the world and throughout history. Obviously the artist is going to develop skills related to the recognition of what are viable symbols that people can relate to. Images have to prove their strength and appeal. Concerning what else is included in my work, whether there is a subtext and how many levels of subject there are, is something that happens in the studio. My work is in the nature of a journal, but it is also like a stew. Most pieces I do relate in a very direct way to what I am going through in my life. I started doing book pieces after I had worked as a production manager and art director for



J.W. Stewart, *Horse and Rider*, 1988. Mixed media on paper;
137 x 222 cm. Photo : Andrew Blanchard

a publishing house. I started doing pieces with bones because I have a mild arthritic condition. The palm is traditionally a symbol of victory. I did palm pieces when I started to feel satisfied that the decision I took to work with montage was bearing fruit and that the work was worth looking at. Some elements in a given piece may be long-term concerns of mine while others can be something I just happened to notice two days ago. I reserve the right to put those two things together. The pictures are constructed so that you can come into them on your own level. My declaration is that I am not only interested in a certain audience seeing my work. The right people for me have got two legs, two arms, more or less, and two eyes. And that is the limit of their qualifications.

A.P. : *But what of the poetry and the discourse on the subject of art and art theory found in the work ? Surely that is intended for a more specialized audience ?*

J.W.S. : I have always had a strong interest in written language and in literature. My two best friends are poets and my father was a journalist. And through some misfortune or other, having misbehaved in a former life, I came under the tutelage, studied poetry, with one of those friends, Michael Harris. I read contemporary poets from the beat school of San Francisco, The New York school starting with Frank O'Hara, Ted Berrigan, and others, and also poets such as Wallace Stevens, John Berryman, etc. My interest tapered off as John Ashbery came to prominence. The reason I enjoy text in my work is simply because I'm a talky kinda guy. The texts that I find most rewarding are semi-appropriated or made up, combined from a number of different sources. I feel a certain inhibition about writing myself because I think it's gratuitous for artists to go slathering texts over their work without having submitted to the discipline of learning how to write. The writing of a text is fraught with semiotical pitfalls. Technical pitfalls as well. For example rather than saying "the writing of a text" I would say "writing", that's an important distinction to me. (...) If you say however that my texts deal with the nature of art or more specifically with art theory, I wouldn't agree entirely. I don't accede to the notion that my work is homogeneous or that its

organization is towards any one specific proposition. How I come to make a given piece has as much to do with a repertoire of symbols; my cast of characters, with the visual agenda; how elements are photo-mechanically reproduced from various sources and inserted into a metaphorical context (which is basically constructed of paint and materials), as it does with a comment on theoretical terrain. In some instances I have treated the text almost as a formal element. I am as interested in the visual functioning of the presence of text as I am in the text itself. Some of the texts can be scanned as texts and read from beginning to end but others function as free verse, automatic poetry or fragmented speech. We have reality and unreality. We have distinctions that are brought out from the text and we have pure images.

A couple of pieces that I showed in this last exhibition (Waddington & Gorce, October 1 - 25, 1988) did address themselves more directly than I have before to art theory and to critical discourse. In the piece entitled *Order of the Elements* (1988) a text from the quattrocento by Lorenzo Valla, who is taking to task, mocking really, the inconsistencies in the colour theory of Bartolo da Sassoferrato, is superimposed over the image of plants whose roots we see penetrating below ground to a layer of organic material including a human skeleton and other references to the past, or history. This is meant to portray how theoretical arguments are often beside the point and the ways in which we, in the present, take from the past what we need and want for our spiritual and artistic growth. The nutrients in the soil have been broken down and transformed into compounds which are assimilable through the roots of the plant. This is analogous, to me, of the very eccentric and individualistic ways that we interpret the past and assimilate it into our consciousness. The question posed is will current discourse facilitate photosynthesis.

**Excerpts from a November 1988 interview
with Allan Pringle**