

The Form of Feeling

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Raoul Hague: Selected Sculptures 1962 - 1975

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On the future of aesthetics

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Raoul Hague: Selected Sculptures 1962 – 1975

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There is no whole self. Any of life's present situations is seamless and sufficient. Are you, as you ponder these disquietudes, anything more than an indifference gliding over the argument I make, or an appraisal of the opinions I expound?

I, as I write this, am only a certainty that seeks out the words that are most apt to compel your attention. That proposition and a few muscular sensations, and the sight of the limpid branches that the trees place outside my window, constitute my current I.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "The Nothingness of Personality"

One can strike hard and deep, and not make a dent. One can aim true and drum up falsities for every move one commits—for every truth one has voiced, or sung, or carved. One can dedicate a life to blowing the dust from piling estimates of dulling wits and be greeted at every turn by nothing but the nullity of the dead eye and the soundlessness of the mincing ear. One can clarify the foment of insight and be handed only the fearful yawn of the vacuum of marketplace thought and the haggle of pedestrian value.

One may do everything right, and reap the benefit of nothing. It is something many are learning now, at a time of failing promises in the pale, ever graying corner of material maintenance. The absence of guarantee is the expenditure we commenced from the start, for it is the toll at the gates of freedom. There is no one to insure our outcomes, and no expenses we can pay that reserve our due, for nothing is owed us, and no one would save us who would not control us. And if we feel we have been assured of our success, it was a self-assurance, and hushed in a false breath.

Which is to say that artistic reputations and registers of worth are worldly and keep no faith. There have been artists of all periods, no doubt, and most to the point, for we know the victims, ours who have been overlooked, who have committed works of extraordinary accomplishment, who have fulfilled the demands of both their personal visions and the requirements of the general acknowledgement of the vocation and have suffered ignorance and the barbaric disregard of simple inattention. And that is to say that, in all likelihood, we bury many of our Michelangelos, our Shakespeares, our Beethovens, unknown. There is a stubborn, ill-mannered obliviousness of appreciation that the manners of keenest vision accrue—the redemption for their volunteerism to Herculean labor.

We should all know better, and yet there is no reason we should—or should be able to. Artistic reputations are made, and the histories of art are written,

by dint of marketing, promotion, and self-promotion. Our attention is turned to where someone turns it, and few of us—we among those who make an avocation of observing and learning from the art being made around us—choose to focus our scrutiny on that which has been selected from among all that is being created. We examine what has been put before us, what has been previously portioned out, and what has been chosen is what the art market throws up, what someone at some point has placed his money on. Because our attention is curtailed, regardless of what we dismiss, whatever we applaud almost invariably is what someone has shown us for the sake of his bet. And to say anything, or nothing, is to work for him or for one of his competitors.

The superb, inspiring, much-missed art writer Arlene Raven once told me that, to know anything about contemporary art, one must visit the artists' studios, not the galleries, for the galleries by and large show only what the market has already approved, or derivatives thereof. To know what artists are doing, one must go and see what artists are doing, not what the market is selling. But even this approach has devastating implicit limits. If to know anything, one must know everything—not merely what has been previously winnowed by someone else's judgment or by blind circumstance—what can one credibly know? And, even seeing all that is humanly possible, is it possible, are we prepared, to refuse to select anything? It is not a logical absurdity, not even an unlikelihood, that all works of art at a given moment would be worthless. Are we in a position to say so? And if not, what can it mean even to say that something is the best we have when something has to be selected? What can "best" mean, and how would we know? It is comparable to saying that we have made a free choice in an election or in an award that must have a winner on schedule. We are, at best, making the best of a bad situation, for what can it mean to anoint something as worthy when we are not capable of saying everything is worthless? Value becomes an accident, a byproduct of circumstance. It is all a matter of situational ethics-excellence a matter of what is best under the circumstances, in a circular argument that fails to make even a single revolution.

And so history is the tale of salesmanship, and excellence is an orphan, hoping for recognition and adoption in a world in which every well-intentioned person is unwittingly waiting for someone else to go first. One would like to think that philosophers of art would be those dedicated and best positioned to exercise freedom of judgment, to manage an estimation of value without slavishly following the demands and directives of the art market, would establish the clear vision out of which an authentic history of art could be composed and mean something significant by the judgment "good," with the definition of the term preceding that to which it applies. For of all the attributions one might think to apply to the occupation, seeing clearly, one might consider, would be the single defining characteristic of a philosopher—

that alone would be enough. But, it appears more likely they are often the most ready victims of the labyrinthine vagaries of value calls and have created the industry of spinning marketing ploys into theories of ostensible aesthetic innovation. And to observe a truly free choice in the name of intrinsic merit—that would be an astonishment.

Art is a market-driven story, a function, in its very definition, of what must be said for profit. Yet, there are galleries that follow their own visions, not of what should be exhibited for keeping up with the times, but what should be exhibited for the sake of merit, of intrinsic worth. And there are, time and again, individual exhibitions that are lessons in what we have overlooked and should have noticed, should have given our attention, for the good sense of having done so.

The exhibition of five sculptures by Raoul Hague is an instance, one of a series of shows of Hague's works over the years that have been attempting the same goal—to bring attention and an appropriate degree of regard to the work of a sculptor who has unfairly and through mere circumstance fallen out of the story of art, a story in which he should have a certain pride of place. The reason for his obscurity is not difficult to understand, and it is a situation facing a number of recent artists of one-time stature: all of them were sculptors, and sculpture does not sell, so there are few galleries devoted to sculpture, so little attention is paid by anyone else. Along with Hague, one can think of Reuben Nakian and Ronald Bladen, as well as a host of sculptors in the last stages of their careers who need now to concern themselves with retaining their place in the story of contemporary art, for without marketing themselves even at this stage of their work, their achievements become eclipsed, because those who compose the story are concerned with recounting what has happened—which means what has been made to happen—rather than what should have happened. (But then, many advanced thinkers of our time, and of most periods, have a particular problem with the issue of the “should.”)

Raoul Hague was an abstract sculptor of the generation of the Abstract Expressionists. He began his art career in the 1930s and was included in the 1933 Museum of Modern Art exhibition “American Sources of Modern Art.” By the 1950s, he had turned to sculpting in wood exclusively, making his body of work a distinctive contribution to the high point of American Art and of the American contribution to abstraction, the principal accomplishment of visual art in the twentieth century.

The five works in the current exhibition—which are accompanied by a video on Hague's life and art—are prime examples of his mature sculpture. Carved from boles of trees and standing roughly from four to six feet high, the works are enhanced and purified composites of natural forms, compounded sweeps and interactions of wood, as if individual growths had intersected and passed

through each other, fashioning an impossible but entirely plausible architecture of timber.

Thus appears the quality of Hague's principle of abstraction, but as with all abstraction, it is not the quality of the non-representation that is revealing of artist's aesthetic, but rather the quality that vitiates the evident abstract intent—the quality that worms to the heart of all ambitions not to represent.

Abstract sculpture, when it has been raised to the point of a true aesthetic efficacy, operates according to a principle of reference, as, in the end, all abstraction must. Sculpture that holds no clear resemblance to anything in observable nature reflects rather a resemblance to what is not to be found in nature. There is—presumed by the practice and voiced overtly by Henry Moore—a catalogue of forms available to the imagination that is universally shared: shapes, as Moore wrote, “to which everyone is subconsciously conditioned and to which they can respond if their conscious control does not shut them off.” There is a vocabulary of pure form that the sculptor may rifle and exploit, and to which the witness of the work may refer.

And from those forms come associations, connections to meanings and feelings that become evident only when the artist has reified them and raised them to conscious attention. Those connections are what Herbert Read called “correspondences”: “real but irrational associations between disparate objects.” “Irrational” is difficult to construe in this claim: if the associations are reproducible, then they are rational; if they are not repeatable, then they are indiscernible. However, what can be detected is that “correspondences” are relationships between things which are otherwise unrelated, relationships that exist only under the aegis of the artistic mood—and that is a principle of organization which is of the essence of Modernism, in all the arts.



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Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

—Baudelaire, “Correspondances”

Raoul Hague, *Untitled*, 1974
Walnut, 58 x 38 x 38 inches

Baudelaire knew of it, perhaps inaugurated it, and was closer to the heart of the matter. Perfumes, colors, sounds—the roster of forms universally shared need not be visual, just as the associations and that which is associated need not be visual. These are configurations of the imagination, and they may be anything the conscious mind can perceive. For the sculptor, as Read remarked, “they are always of shape,” but shape is not inherently a visual matter, for it is not inherently a matter of solidity, of stabilized, observable structure. It is simply pattern, pattern of any kind, pattern perceived in any way, pattern even of intangibles, pattern that may be felt rather than conceived—an emerging regularization of otherwise indeterminables, a formulation in the imagination.

The correspondence is the form, or a discernable “edge” of it, like what one of the blind men may grasp of the elephant. For Hague, the legibility of his shapes—the universality of them, which is the only possible principle of legibility in abstraction—is not that of observable structure, not that of simultaneously and completely exposed form conceivable to the mind’s eye and coming out of a catalogue of inherited *spécial* architectonics. Hague found a language that is evident and legible to the senses of the sensitive witness, a lexicon ready for recognition, but it was not a fund of given “shapes”—it was a wellspring of gestures.

There is, it may be loosely called, an archetype of the gesture as much as of the established form: a configuration of motion, grasped as much as a proprioceptive sensation—an awareness of muscular action—as a track cut in the air. There is a language of such actions. It is the stuff of ballet, the articulation of movements that seem to be of an elegant profundity although they are indecipherable as purposive movements, as gestures intended to commit some intent. It is the stuff of magicians, as we know them from storybook tales and legend, sorcerers who worry the air and conjure as much by the slow and sliding intricacies of their hands as by the hypnotic intonations they voice.

These are motions that possess an hypnotic aura, that of themselves seem to conjure a spell, that throw the trance. There is a space that can be opened by the exacting, slow, lyrical, sinuous motions of the limbs and the body, a mesmerizing area of the imagination, a suffusion of the mind in which the thoughts become merely configurations of that dense medium which is the atmosphere of the thinking. The quality of that atmosphere, the near aroma of it, is not a quality of transport but rather an aspect of character after one has been transported—an altered fiber of mind, altered by an extremity of mood, like a chemical change of the spirit, an alchemical alteration: a potency of disposition. That space is a volume of which art is a natural denizen, in which art is the automatic outcome.

Hague's sculptures are the forms of essential gestures, standing as if Platonic moments of movement committed in wood, as if eternally in motion and infinitely encased in the trunk of a tree. They enact gesture as a language unto itself: sweeping and tortuous lines of shifting effort that draw the eye along their traces even as they stand still and fully visible to the fixed gaze. They are ballets frozen, dances that do not move, dances with no dancers. And as pure gesture, they are pure art—there is no message, no “concept,” no meaning. And they are impervious, indelible forms that ultimately are not forms at all but the active creation that could result in a form, and they are impenetrable to the interpreting mind. There is nothing one can say of the intention that is behind them, except that it and they are *sui generis*—they are unique elements and are not of a type with anything other than each other. And they cast an aura like a conjuring.

Although Hague denied that he observed the grain of the wood as he worked it—“I do not see the graining at all, throughout my working with the wood”—there is no mistaking that the waving actions into which the artist has carved his works follow and often enhance the intrinsic formations of the growth of the tree. The flow of the lilting movements of the sculpted forms is of a piece with the lilt of the growth of the wood.

It is a rule of sculpting in marble that the form must be sensitive to the material and must not look forced upon the stone—the form must seem to have grown out of the rock, must match and follow its natural action and principle of breakage. Despite his protestation, Hague followed the same law. In each instance here, the wood could well have grown just this way, could have developed from the soil in exactly this manner. And yet, the wood could not have grown this way. These works are nothing natural, they are implicitly artificial, they are as blatantly made sculpture as they are palpably responsive to the natural events of the wood. They embody a human response to the movements of nature. They are the intersection of the human and the natural, the overlapping of the touch of intention and that which has been untouched by intention—the automatic and the imposed. They are neither pure artifact nor pure natural object, neither of humankind nor of nature's kind. They are some third thing, something pure and unlike anything else, something without a reference—works of art with no decipherable meaning in any other activity of thought. They are pure unto themselves, as is the character of Hague they are marked by and effuse.

They are purely the actions they configure, and that fact raises a significant question. If they mean nothing in any conventional sense, if they are only the forms that appear out of the actions they commit, why then are they not simply pure design? Why are they not just enormous bric-a-brac, or pieces of furniture to no realistic purpose? Are they art at all, art in any sense that warrants serious respect?

But, why is ballet not merely a cavort? How is it that a manner of movement the body can adopt, one that has no reference outside the contingencies of its own art form, no ties to anything other than its own inner laws, can be something more than a prancing about? Yet, it clearly is far more, and by that alignment, one can know there is an answer to the question of Hague.

The answer begins with the air of portentousness that accompanies these works, and that acquires one's senses the moment one enters the gallery. There is a livid presence to them, a density of impression and a looming quality in more than their literal, physical stature. They impart a sense of a deep significance—of significance devoid of meaning.

As pure gesture—motions captured in wood that signify no thought, no motivation, no purpose—they are thoughts of a different order. These works, like ballet itself, are the thought that gesture is, the language of the unintended reflex, the thinking of a mind that moves us when we are not aware of our movements, when we are not cutting them to plan. They are of the mind that breathes us, that orchestrates our stances, that designs and tailors in intricate details our expressions and postures. They are the thoughts we do not know we have, or rather, that have us. For, what is the meaning of a gesture? It is the natural expression of the mathematical computations, the ticking calculations, of our involuntary responses—the lyricism of our other selves.

And, what is emotion other than gesture, other than a caliber of movement? Consider how we talk about feelings—there is the language of gesture everywhere in it. We speak of a sobbing sorrow, of a wringing anguish. We refer to a giddy happiness, and a fuming anger, and a swelling pride, swelling like a chest. And bitterness is a taste in the mouth. We feel no feeling without feeling it through the body, and the body feels no feeling without its commission as an action, and that action is as much of our inner selves as the subjective sensation we prefer to “think” a feeling purely is. But that is merely what we think. We speak of it differently from the way we think it. The gesture is the emotion, and the sculpture of Raoul Hague is the essential expression of emotions, emotions too complex for the simplicity of names, wrought in their natural forms of actions. His works speak not the language of concepts but the articulations, in dactylic measures, of the dense suffusions of moods.

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In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of “world history”—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.—

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it. But if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that it floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that it cannot immediately be blown up like a bag by a slight breath of this power of knowledge; and just as every porter wants an admirer, the proudest human being, the philosopher, thinks that he sees the eyes of the universe telescopically focused from all sides on his actions and thoughts.

—Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense”

Philosophers like to talk of thought as deliberate, as meaningful, as “meant,” for that is the warrant of their authority, the stipulation for the significance of what they do—it is their unexamined assumption, their Achilles heel. Or it is for most. Some got it right.

For there is the growing possibility, the increasing likelihood, that thought is not the carrier of content, or representations of that which is not thought adhesived by something or other that is pure and non-representative thought, but rather merely actions of mental life, movements of something intangible, or what appears intangible to us as we think of it—pure gesture, simple activity like insect feelers lacing and unlacing, simple reflex action of the organism. There is the mounting chance that thought is not a receptacle, not a housing for meaning, but a meaningless “rumination” of muscular reactions proceeding by organic impulse—simply happening. That thought is just steam over the kettle—mere byproduct.

The most advanced “thought” during the last hundred years or so can be seen to have sensed a crisis coming, to have intuited the approach of the breakdown of any possible belief that thought has insight, has implication, has content—a meaning. In the sciences, we have had to confront the growing eradication of established categories of conceivable



**Raoul Hague, *Untitled*, c. 1975
Walnut, 70 x 56 x 29 inches**

being—we have encountered cosmological facts of incomprehensible power and scale, beautiful images of cosmic events that have been photographed with an arbitrarily selected, arbitrarily limited band of light waves and wear imposed colors for they have no colors in themselves, that have no human reference, subatomic particles that are precisely understood but inconceivable as material entities, electrons that “exist” without mass, that possess at any moment either position or velocity but not both, that are waves unless they appear as particles and are particles unless they appear as waves. We find our computations are fully capable of encapsulating “entities” that we cannot begin to present to ourselves through our mind’s eye.

And in the arts, Modernism complicated to the point of conundrum the relationship between content and form, or style, to such a degree that the idea of content, or a meaning, to a work of art began to become inconceivable.

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To me style is just the outside of content, and content the inside of style, like the outside and the inside of the human body. Both go together, they can’t be separated.

—Jean-Luc Godard

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What is “content”? Or, more precisely, what is left of the notion of content when we have transcended the antithesis of style (or form) and content? Part of the answer lies in the fact that for a work of art to have “content” is, in itself, a rather special stylistic convention. The great task which remains to critical theory is to examine in detail the formal function of subject-matter.

—Susan Sontag, “On Style”

Content raises now the question: what formal function does it serve, what does it do, what shape does it take, what action does it commit? The “thought” that a work of art “contains” a thought, conveys a message, carries an import, passes beyond the brinks of obscurity. This, as much as anything, is what Modernism reached towards—not an insight, but a relation of parts, a

demonstration of interaction, of correspondence. This, as much as anything, was the lesson of abstraction.

And so meaning becomes an illusion of reflex action, an appearance of what thinking is when it triggers thinking, which is what it does—merely the forced appearance from the inside of the thing. It becomes mere effect, a mark made, an indentation caused by a collision of an intangible, mental gesture with itself, a bruise of “intellectual” clumsiness—an accident. In short, the mind becomes mindless.

And Borges was right. With the loss of consciousness as that which is authentically conscious—conscious “of” something—comes the loss of the center of consciousness. Without awareness, there is, in no “meaningful” sense, no mind, no self, no soul. No one is there. There is only the fleeting play of sensation, even when it is the apparent sensation of a “thought.”

And Nietzsche saw the matter, as well. Those who occupy a place in the Nietzsche industry tend to interpret him in the very sense that Sontag objected with regard to art—frequently they over-write what he said for the sake of what they think, of what they would have him say. Nietzsche’s demotions of thought are too often taken as qualifications of the standard understanding, rather than redefinitions of what we believe. And there is a great peril in that approach. Anyone of Nietzsche’s caliber—assuming for the moment that everything said so far is put by the boards and there can be someone of Nietzsche’s caliber: a thinker who really thinks—“means” what he says. And Nietzsche’s “meaning” could not be more plain. Thought is an accident of evolution, signifying nothing.

As he did when he wrote, “We need ‘unities’ in order to be able to reckon: that does not mean we must suppose that such unities exist. We have borrowed the concept of unity from our ‘ego’ concept—our oldest article of faith.” This is, as it is with Borges, simply the Hume hypothesis: going beyond Berkeley’s dismissal of existence as anything more than perception, his limitation of the existence of objects to that which is known, Hume relegated the mind of the perceiver to nothing more than “a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” The “perpetual flux” should be familiar to anyone who has spent time poring over Nietzsche’s ontological theories—it should be familiar to anyone who has made his way through *The Birth of Tragedy*, wrestled with the Dionysian, and considered the implications of Nietzsche’s rejection of the *principium individuationis*—a position he never abandoned.

Which is to say that in his ontology, Nietzsche adopted the Idealist posture—on this matter, the matter of the status of the subject, to this extreme. It is a posture not a great deal different from that of Schopenhauer, although

the further back to intellectual foundations one tracks, the more their, well, “thinking” diverges. Schopenhauer’s *Will* is greatly what Nietzsche thought it to be—too object-like, too stabilized, too capable of interactive causation, too able of initiating action. Nietzsche had a better feel for flux, for the lack of self-identity, for indefiniteness—he simply had a better conception of the inconceivable.

But both take a significant stand at this time, when seen from this time, for they achieved prescience for, they arrived early at, the foundering of the specifically human version of knowledge. The human reference in all our knowledge is fast becoming meaningless. We study light waves as the network that binds the universe and that travel through the vacuum of space, where there is nothing that can wave—but that is how we understand waving, out of our direct, *human* experience. We encounter particles (objects) that persist without possessing mass—but that is how we understand objects, out of our direct, *human* experience. And we discover, through scientific experiment, that we physically begin to commit our intentional actions microseconds before our brains register our decisions—but that is how we understand decisions, out of our direct, *human* experience. Our subjective lives are becoming immaterial to what we are coming to know.

And our knowledge increasingly has a mathematical precision, in algorithms that describe what we cannot conceive in any way more directly—but “more directly” means by the mind’s eye, which is how we believe we properly understand, out of our direct, *human* experience. (And one might well ask, who invented the mathematics? But perhaps it was not “invented” at all.) And what we learn, more and more, makes a mockery of our sense of sublimity, which is tied to the “monumentality” of mountains and oceans, measured against *us*, of our understanding of significance, which is tied to the effects of events on *us*, in our small corner of the universe, of our comprehension of survival, which evidently means nothing to us beyond our own survival, which ultimately makes all our judgments a matter of convenience to *us*.

Theirs is all the more significant, for we can be seen to be, philosophically, in a period of reaction, in a time struggling to hold the back the wave threatening to submerge the remaining vestiges of distinctively human thought. For what is Phenomenology but the last terrified shriek before the destruction of human consciousness—an attempt to insist on the pertinence of the human center to all things, of human experience positioned “as if the world pivoted around it,” of the concerns of living as if they were issues of existence in a universe that dwarfs us, of “facticity,” which, for all its inconceivability, ratifies and reinforces us as the matter of concern for existence itself, as if the existence that matters is our own.

We are coming to a time in which philosophy may not survive, may become

consumed by science as the only knowledge worthy of the name, as the only knowledge that is not a surreptitious self-justification—not a fairy tale. Unless we learn the lesson from Nietzsche—that we must think of what is without concerning ourselves with ourselves, perhaps that we must learn authentically to think for the first time, if that even is an option and not merely another of our naiveties.

And art may not survive, for how much art has there been that is not a presentation, a recounting, of specifically human concerns, of the world as viewed by human beings, throwing up our naïve sense of what is important—of the human drama? And yet there has been much, for this too is the achievement of Modernism, of abstraction—an art project that has attempted to look beyond the human, to incorporate the larger world, to comprehend the “drama,” if that is what it can be called, of the world beyond ourselves. What is non-representational is specifically non-representational of what we have known. What it may well represent we have not yet learned to say. Perhaps we are finding that we know better than we “know.”

That attempt has certainly been made, and it has certainly been tried in the sculpture of Raoul Hague, in which the disembodied gestures of mental life, the sweeping moves of fleeting impressions, the feeling forms of mere flux in place of endowed and self-aware selfhood, is embodied like a natural growth—as natural, as simply organic, as a tree.

His may be among the few bodies of work that, at this late date, survive—that, specifically, survive us.

Front page: Raoul Hague, *Michigan Bound*, 1972
Walnut, 40 x 57 x 31 inches

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