

A Sculpture by Gail Hastings: *a page torn from a secret*

Compression It winds its way like an artery through a massive body of solidifying, classified time and knowledge. Our hearts beat with anticipating intention as we pass – along the library's thick spiral staircase. In search of a piece of information, a fact, a figure, we ascend floor upon floor of densely shelved rows, crammed with books. The rows of floors, of shelves, books and words all become passage ways of varying scales through which we pass. While ascending I wonder – could one memory contain all this knowledge – and further still – could one mathematical equation be a passage to all information?

I have accidentally passed the floor I need, and so retreat while still considering – If such was the case, if all information could be compressed, what would be lost, what would I mourn?

Compression I sit at one of the library's study desks to write this accompanying essay. Though there's a sign saying *no speaking*, the person next to me is restless and asks, 'so what do you do?' My stomach tightens as I ponder whether to lie and say I'm a student, or own up and say that I'm a sculptor. The fear of sounding pretentious is usually overshadowed by fear of the next question that usually follows ... 'so do you sculpt in wood, marble, stone or wax for casting? Clay maybe?'

'No. Passage ways.'

Silence. The silence I had dreaded.

The distance between their idea of sculpture and mine is vast, an amount of time compressed; a passage of thoughts, ideas and philosophies encoded.

I see their view of sculpture as a place where imagination swooned. A place where the senses touched the sensuousness of matter. Where the sculpted form, a moment's poise, allowed a grace of balanced proportions – termed in a language of sensation. A place where you found yourself, unexpectedly moved. This was, however, a privileged place; a place which few could afford and appreciate. A privilege of place which, through transformations, artists have endeavoured to redress. This silence, for me, is caused by an uncanny irony; for the transformations have created a distance which only those schooled in the changes feel confident enough to negotiate. And so the place remains privileged, but of another sort.

I wish to congratulate the stranger for having asked – but how does one, even though schooled, reply? What are the words that might bridge this distance; a distance paved by codification and classified distinctions.

My anguished silence continues.

Compression Has your stomach not churned when a curator – having asked to look at your work for no particular reason ('to stay informed, in touch,' they say) and who professes to have keenly watched the work's development – asks, within one minute of having looked at the work, 'so what does it mean?'

I stutter, for before me floods an ocean of events – like the apparition of a life that (I am told) a person has before drowning. I drown while trying to compress this immensity of ocean into two sentences of meaning.

Does this curator not know how to let the work speak for itself? I wish to yell, feel outraged, but I am polite, so I suggest that it has no specific meaning, no hidden goal, but rather a passage of events. Like the sensuality that you might meet through a moment's poise; such as the unexpected yet delightful place in which you might find yourself at the end of a conversation's passage.

Once the curator leaves I become reasonable, prepared to admit that art can not speak for itself for the oversimplified reason that it is never *by* itself. Inherent in the process of publicly exhibiting, is an accompaniment of status symbols (the artist's name, curriculum vitae, place ...). The hard work for art to now do, in acknowledging that it does not speak by itself, is to not let the compression of signifiers, reliance on status and the commentary which follows, completely speak for it.

Expansion Wanting some guidance for this essay, I browse amongst the rows of books. Selecting one, I turn to a page and read that ... science is endeavouring to discover a Theory of Everything. The Theory of Everything will be represented by a mathematical equation of compressed information.¹ Desiring to understand, I turn the page and initially feel slightly affronted. For before me, running over the top of the words, sprinting so as not to get caught – is a child's robust scribble. Scribbled as if in a quick fury and in a moment snatched – unobserved by the parent as they were perhaps looking elsewhere; perhaps driving with the child in the back seat on their way to return the book to the library. An expression of rage, a silent protest, marking the absurdity of growing up. Perhaps summoned by the indignity suffered when one begins to discover, that life is not about possibility and expansion, but probability and compression. Shelved. While the physical scale of the library's passage ways diminish – surprisingly, the place to which the most diminished, such as a sentence of words, eventually leads is enormous. It contains you and me, the trees and flowers, the sun and moon – and the library. It is a place where our imagination swoons. A place where our senses can touch the sensuousness of matter. Where a moment's poise allows the grace and balance of proportions – termed in a language of sensation. It feels impossible to say what this place means, it is a passage through which we might discover the unexpected, the undetermined; an incident that went astray; a scribble of outrage.

It is this place that is meant to occur when every day for one month Penelope Aitken, the assistant of ACCA enters the gallery and closes the back door's blind.

It is to be a place where the real and the imagined intermingle, creating sensations and possibilities which no word, theory or mathematical equation could ever compress.

GAIL HASTINGS

1. 'In general, the shorter the possible representation of a string of numbers, the less random it is. If there is no abbreviated representation at all, then the string is random in the real sense that it contains no discernible order that can be exploited to code its information content more concisely. It has no representation short of a full listing of itself. Any string of symbols that can be given an abbreviated representation is called algorithmically compressible.'

On this view, we recognise science to be the search for algorithmic compressions. We list sequences of observed data. We try to formulate algorithms that compactly represent the information content of those sequences. Then we test the correctness of our hypothetical abbreviations by using them to predict the next terms in the string. These predictions can then be compared with the future direction of the data sequence. Without the development of algorithmic compressions of data all science would be replaced by mindless stamp collecting – the indiscriminate accumulation of every available fact. Science is predicated upon the belief that the Universe is algorithmically compressible and the modern search for the Theory of Everything is the ultimate expression of that belief, a belief that there is an abbreviated representation of the logic behind the Universe's properties that can be written down in finite form by human beings.'

– John D. Barrow, *Theories of Everything: The Quest for Ultimate Explanation*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p.11

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He looked towards the centre desperately seeking some morsel of meaning, some mere reason for being. The centre was, however, empty: an empty stage upon which plays a passage of time. Is this meaning?

Discouraged he looked away when, gently, his senses were summoned by a rivulet of fresh air, guiding his attention to the back door. There – running, stumbling through – was a woman in tortured haste, entering as if escaping some terrible horror outside.

In breathless anticipation, he watched her passage subside at the centre of the room; a room now brimming with a silence dense and thick. Unsure whether to offer help or patiently await her explanation, he paused – but her words were unforthcoming.

Frantically her sight sought then secured the room's exit (through the foyer) before steadfastly settling on him.

Her fist, clutched tight to her chest, seemed to be

strangling some terrible secret – suppressing some terrible utterance. With hesitation her arm, hand then fist unfurled as she slowly moved toward him. Revealed was a torn page screwed tight by her grip; a page transferred to his possession while he stood transfixed by her gesture. She departed, unnoticed.

Roused from this stupor by the gallery assistant re-informing him that the exhibition had not yet been installed – he was told that if he cared to return on August 5th, he could then see the sculptor's work.

It was a quarter to five, time to close the gallery. 'No', replied the assistant to his enquiry, 'no one except yourself has passed through the foyer'. With this she closed the back door and pulled down the blind.

Perturbed, he quickly sought evidence of the occurrence but was dismayed – for what he held tight was not a page torn from a book, but a frail leaf turned crimson: a leaf, from the garden outside.