



PROJECT MUSE®

Principles of Integration I Have Found

Joop Beljon

Leonardo, Volume 1, Number 1, January 1968, pp. 17-24 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/596725/summary>

PRINCIPLES OF INTEGRATION I HAVE FOUND

Joop Beljon*

Abstract—*Like the constructivists I believe in objective laws governing our so-called ‘works of art’. Unlike them, however, I feel sure that those laws ought not to be restricted to rules derived from geometry. For me every human phenomenon contains a complete instruction-book for my special kind of activity.*

In my weaker moments I tell myself how enchanting an idea it would be if my neighbours compared me with the little James Watt looking at the steam coming from his mother’s tea-kettle. But, of course, I am not alone at finding myself at this starting-point. I think of, for example, Kowalski who, with his underwater explosions and other experiments is letting the forces of nature work for him.

As a sculptor I am prepared to learn everything from nature, not in the way of Arp or Moore, but in the way already pointed out by Thomas d’Aquinas (imitatio naturae in operatione). But at the same time I am willing to learn from writers and entertainers, from the Bible and Shakespeare, to Eartha Kitt and Bertha von Paraboum. I may be inspired by the way the wash is hanging from a clothes line (see my: ‘Shanty Town’) or the way the light is playing on the streets of New York (see my: ‘Homage to Sam Rodia’). Sometimes I use the simple principle of laying stones one on top of the other (see my: ‘Egelstelling’).

The driving force behind everything I do is, I suppose, my permanent discontent with my visual surroundings. I try to improve in the first place, of course, the things that are within my reach—for instance the several living-rooms that I have owned in my life. From creating my own environment spring the ideas for my work as a whole. In this sense architecture, sculpture, painting and design have for me become one.

I am an integrationist.

Ten years ago I did a small essay on Marc Chagall, which began with the words: ‘What I am going to say here in connexion with Chagall may have little to do with this painter.’ Chagall, for my sake, objected. ‘Why discourage your readers right from scratch?’ he asked. [1]

Now that I have set myself the task of saying something about my own work, I can only repeat my words: what I am going to say in connexion with my work may have little to do with me.

‘Know yourself’ goes the adage. But who does? As a matter of fact, I am conscious of some of my objectives, and I flatter myself at being capable of writing a small piece of retro- and introspection.

My element is form. If there were not the story about young James Watt having the power of steam revealed to him while sitting in his mother’s kitchen, I might have been able to spread a legend on myself, that while sitting in my mother’s kitchen, watching her emptying a bag full of rice on the table, the

procedure revealed to me the secret of form. What arose on the table was a fine mountain, Fu-ji-no-Yama, a natural form. I have always liked to study the ways in which forms originate, to make them my own, and to bring forms into being that do not stem from anything I have seen before. Seeing for me is not identical with measuring, and making things is not rendering what I have seen. What interests me is the *process*, and I agree with Thomas d’Aquinas that art is not sheer *imitatio naturae* but *imitatio naturae in operatione*. I am not fascinated by nature, but by what makes nature ‘tick’.

Natural laws are my material. My Dutch forefathers made water, their arch-enemy, work for them, and they used the wind as a driving power for their mills. As a sculptor I do the same. I handle natural processes. I am at the switch-board of these processes.

Here lies the big difference between our generation and the preceding one. Jean Arp and Henry Moore collected shells, bones and stones. They made these forms their point of departure. They studied the shapes that came out of the hands of God. We in

*Artist living at 120 Merelhoven, Capelle a/d IJssel, Holland. (Received 25 August 1967).

our time slip into God's laboratory to get hold of his secret books, recipes and instruments, and start making a microcosm of our own.

When I behold the waves of the sea I do not get the urge to make either a naturalistic or an abstract seascape. I want to make waves myself, in some way or another. I will refer to my own work to illustrate my thesis.

In the autumn of 1966 I stayed for some weeks at the weaving factory, De Ploeg, in Holland. I studied the way textiles behave in sun, rain and wind. The sun makes the cloth transparent, and provides the possibility of double and triple forms. The wind makes it move in unexpected ways. The rain lets

'Zee-anemoon' (Fig. 6). In their hard struggle for naked economic survival the rattan workers have thoroughly explored the laws of their material, which they offered to me for my sculptural purposes.

I agree with Lessing's theories, developed in his 'Lakoon' that these universal laws connect the various arts with each other. As a sculptor I am not above learning from a strip-teaser the way she creates suspense. Again as a sculptor, I get a shock of recognition when I see how an able playwright, like Moss Hart, places his gags after periods wherein seemingly nothing happens. It reminds me of the fact that a sculptured wall also has to have variations in expressivity. A strong element works better in a

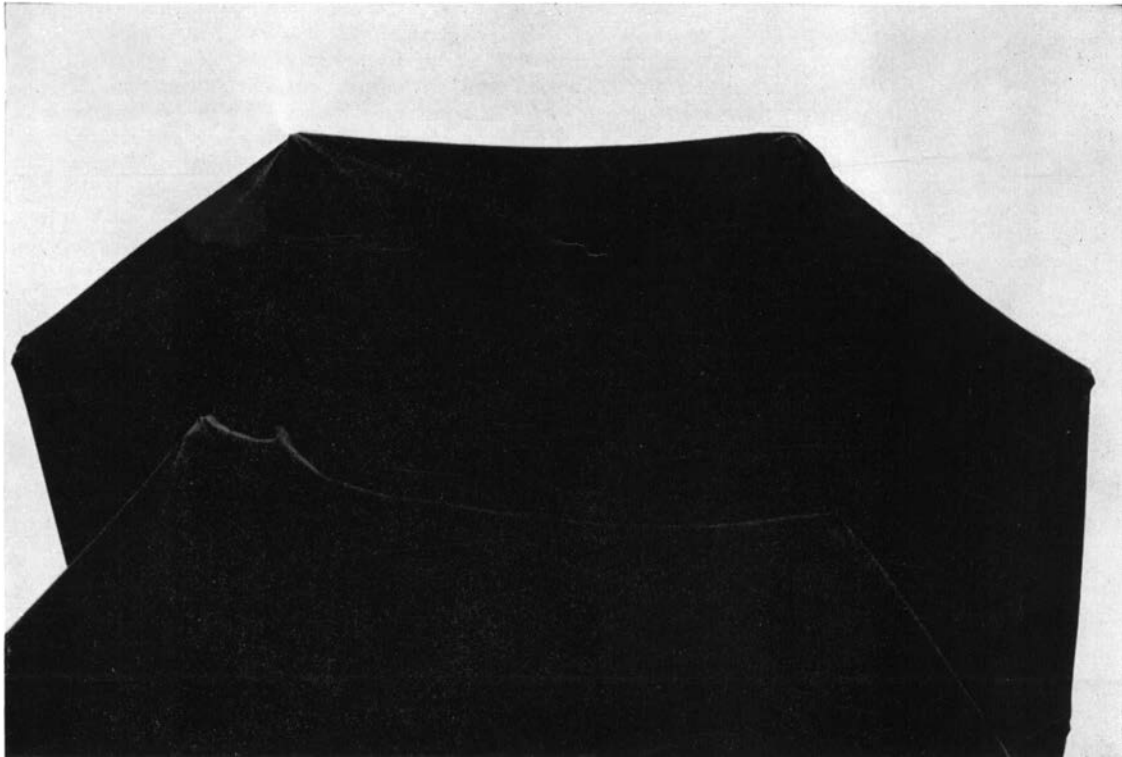


Fig. 1. 'Nanny's Birthday', (detail), 3 m high, cloth, 1966. (Photo: Mike Toner.)

the cloth hang down in a mournful way (Fig. 1). Textiles like to be hung and draped or twisted and knotted and woven (Fig. 2). I made all these things as my points of departure for the construction of my sculptures 'Shanty Town' (Fig. 3), 'Animal Lunaire', 'Nanny's Birthday' (Fig. 1) and others.

Principles of form need not necessarily be derived from nature. Old handicrafts, modern technology and other arts contain them in quantities. I should like to refer here to the forms made by Piotr Kowalski during our stay at the California State College, Long Beach, that were created by means of underwater explosions, and to the book he produced for Claude Givaudan (Gherasim Luca's *Sisyphé Géométre*). I repeated here my adventures with textiles at the old rattan centre, Noordwolde, in Holland.

At Noordwolde I made, among other pieces, my 'Histoire d'O', 'Zulu-girl's Play-time' (Fig. 4), 'Obelisk' (Fig. 5), 'Olisbos for a Big Lady' and

surrounding that is quiet. So I can say that actors, writers and even entertainers and jazz-musicians are my masters. I hope it will remain that way.

As a being concerned with forms, I am naturally interested in my environment. It is no secret that the visual quality of our new towns and their surrounding landscape is rather depressing. Walking through the streets of the new satellite cities around Amsterdam, Paris or Los Angeles the following questions come to my mind. Cannot the architect find a way of preventing the chilling effect of monotony? Can he no longer give market places, traffic squares or important buildings an identity of their own? Cannot he find visual means to help one to know where one is or where one is going? Is he only able to use scale and size in a way that is nauseating instead of giving us the joy of encountering a new dimension? Is he unable to relate the size of a human being to a skyscraper? Is he blind to



Fig. 2. 'Guerilla', (detail), 5 × 3 m, cloth, 1966. (Photo: Mike Toner.)



Fig. 3. 'Shanty Town', (detail), area length 80 m, object height 4 m, cloth, 1966. (Photo: Mike Toner.)

the fact that the 'constructed'—in contrast to the 'grown' town—is absolutely inhuman?

Has he forgotten the art of grouping and relating buildings? Does he consider the rectangle as sacrosanct? Has he never seen works by the old architects who succeeded in finding a variety of ways of going from one level to another, of going around a corner or in finding forms for fences and

Goeritz, the chapel of Szekely and Constant's 'New Babylon'.

To return to my own part—in Long Beach in 1965 I constructed a 60 m concrete wall around the parking lot of the California State College in order to distract the eye of the passer-by from the parked cars (Fig. 7). The wall is a sort of curtain that gives visitors the feeling that they are really on campus



Fig. 4. 'Zulu-girl's Playtime', (detail), height 5 m, rattan, 1966. (Photo: Mike Toner.)

other details? Is it a necessity that all houses all over the world look the same? Does not climate and temperament or tradition any longer dictate differences between regions? Does no one recognize that there ought to be an architectural difference, a natural hierarchy, between an embassy and a movie-house?

In this situation it is no wonder that the specialist of three-dimensional form is pushed to detail-solving activities concerning architecture. We are living in the time of mini-architecture, of Bloc's 'Sculpture Habitable', Soleri's 'Mesa City', the 'Towers' of

ground after they have walked through the wall. Visually, the wall creates a transition between the size of the high buildings and the size of the man. The buildings are announced visually, and the visitor has the time to get accustomed to the idea that he is nearing the school. It is an eternal law that nothing must come abruptly. The hero of a play cannot possibly fall from the air in the third act without been announced beforehand. And this applies to the visual arts.

I am conscious of the fact, that with this wall I worked more or less as an architect. I might have

done this work as the collaborator of an architect or a landscaper.

It was in the same spirit that I conceived my three towers in copper called 'Egelstelling' (Fig. 8), and also the furniture I do from time to time—like my 'Bar à Gogo' and my new interior. Since I have the

like a Sisyphus, and I have the impression that people who think like me (Goeritz, Kowalski, Nivola and others) feel the same.

It may be clear that with these objectives of mine the art gallery and gallery art do not mean anything to me. My place is not the 'show' but daily life. I

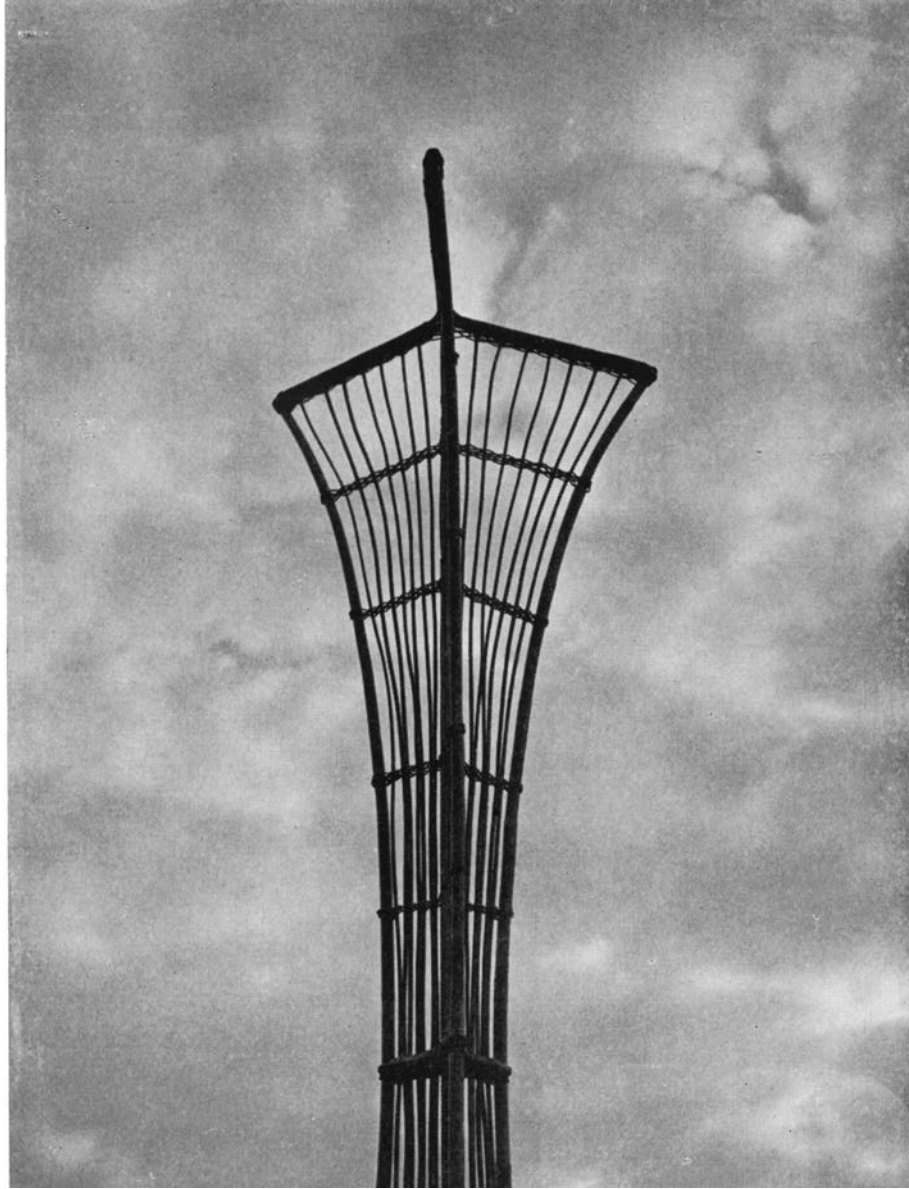


Fig. 5. 'Obelisk', (detail), height 4 m, rattan, 1966. (Photo: Mike Toner.)

impression that the natural environment on this planet is hastily being spoiled and the identity of the old 'grown' town is being destroyed by the consequences of over-population, I see a task for the sculptor as an assistant in city and landscape enhancement. With his knowledge of forms and with his suggestions, perhaps in the long run, design for our living might return to the human touch and become something like the equivalent of nature. When a tree is doomed, we have to design a new one.

It goes without saying that in the actual circumstances our contribution is only a small one. I feel

like to be involved in the formal solution of a park bench, a staircase, a balcony, a playground, a parking lot or a landmark. I would feel at home on a team that is solving the traffic problems in a big city. It is the task of the modern artist to be in the midst of modern technology and to make the machine sing.

It's a pity for all of us that so many artists still regard themselves as half-gods, whose only satisfaction is a place on the front page. In comparison to the quantity of artists, front pages are few. And so there is much silly competition and frustration. It appears there is no place for artists of my kind.



Fig. 6. 'Zee-anemoon', diameter 6 m, height 1 m, rattan, 1966. (Photo: Mike Toner.)



Fig. 7. 'Homage to Sam Rodia', area length 60 m, object height 4 m, painted concrete, 1965. (Located at California State College, Long Beach, U.S.A.)



Fig. 9. My study with my first piece of sculpture in textile, 1966. (Photo: Kok Storm.)

In the actual circumstances that is true. But it need not be true, in my opinion and in the light of my ideals. We shall overcome in the end.

In every street, in every town and in every small village lays a task for us '*plasticiens*'. There would be plenty of places for us in the factories of prefab concrete elements, at the centre of technology, if only community leaders would see it and if only we would be prepared to do things anonymously.

George Mathieu once wrote that industrial design by the industrial designer is perversity. That is also true. But in the hands of a real '*createur de formes*' it need not be a perversity. Function in itself, as designers think of it, is not beauty, nor is it right to stick a beautiful piece of art to the wall of a building like a stamp on a letter.

I aim at the genuine article, at the whole thing, the organic. And that is logical enough, while the beauty I aim at stems from organic sources, from natural physical and constructive laws.

When finally I am asked what really makes me 'tick', I must say: woman. If in the lines above I may have given the impression of being an idealist, a ripened boy scout, then, I must deny it. I am first and foremost a worshipper of the womb, and design for me begins with building around that womb, that is to say at home. My home is my laboratory. There I am free, and my ideas arise from making my living-room, bedroom and garden. It is there that integration begins (Fig. 9). I am not aiming explicitly at erotic or pornographic art. But Eros, for me, is the driving force underneath it all.



Fig. 8. '*Egelstelling*', object height 4 m, copper, 1966. (Photo: Mike Toner.)

REFERENCES

1. J. J. Beljon, *The Clocks of Chagall* (Hilversum: Dejong, 1954).

Mes Principes d'Intégration

Résumé—Tout comme les constructivistes, je crois aux lois objectives qui gouvernent nos prétendues 'œuvres-d'Art'. Mais contrairement à eux, je suis certain que ces lois ne devraient pas se limiter à celles dérivées de la géométrie. Quant à moi, *tout* phénomène humain contient un manuel complet pour le genre d'activité qui est la mienne.

Dans mes moments de doute, je me dis comme ce serait merveilleux si mes contemporains pouvaient me comparer au jeune James Watt regardant la vapeur s'échapper de la bouilloire de sa maman. Mais, bien sûr, je ne suis pas le seul à me trouver à ce point de départ. Je pense, par exemple, à Kowalski qui dans ses explosions sous-marines et ses autres expériences laisse aux forces de la Nature le soin de travailler pour lui.

Comme sculpteur, je suis prêt à accepter tout ce que m'enseigne la Nature, non pas dans le même sens qu'Arp ou Moore, mais de la manière qu'évoquait déjà St Thomas d'Aquin (*imitatio naturae in operatione*). Néanmoins, je désire tout autant m'instruire grâce à ce qu'enseignent les écrivains et les amuseurs publics, grâce à la Bible et à Shakespeare, Eartha Kitt et Bertha von Paraboum. Je pourrais trouver mon inspiration en observant comment la lessive est accrochée sur la corde à linge (voir mon 'Shanty Town') ou encore la manière dont la lumière joue dans les rues de New York (voir mon 'Hommage à Sam Rodia'). Il m'arrive d'utiliser un principe fort simple, en disposant des pierres les unes sur les autres (comme pour mon 'Egelstelling'). La force motrice qui agit dans tout ce que je fais c'est, je le suppose, mon permanent mécontentement face à mon entourage visuel. Pour commencer, bien entendu, j'essaie d'améliorer les objets qui sont à ma portée. Par exemple, les divers intérieurs que j'ai occupés au cours de ma vie. A partir de la création du décor qui m'entoure je puise les idées dont je me sers pour l'ensemble de mon œuvre. Dans cet esprit-là, l'architecture, la sculpture, la peinture et le dessin ne forment plus pour moi qu'un seul et même tout.

Je suis un intégrationniste.