





Chelsea College of Art at Manresa Road, London, 1963
Courtesy Chelsea College of Arts Library, University of the Arts London

THE ACT OF LOOKING

JUAN CRUZ

Roger Ackling was very good at making people feel good about themselves – the way in which he expressed such genuine interest and even amazement about their work made them feel elated. He did this partly by heightening the expectation of the moment, by making it feel as if looking at something was an ecstatic and even transcendental act; a tough and significant moment. He privileged the act of looking almost in a physical sense and although I don't believe he was a vegetarian I did hear him say once that he wouldn't eat anything that had eyes. It really galled him that in Spain small birds were netted and eaten in bars through the evening.

I often heard him speak of the way in which, when he started making work by burning lines onto driftwood with a magnifying glass, people would say that it wasn't a meaningful process, that it couldn't possibly be art. I do wonder who these people were, because the work seems to inhabit a relatively mainstream space of art with considerable poise. I think he started working in this way in 1974, and a lot had happened by then that was certainly much more difficult to accept aesthetically and politically than the rather beautiful and meaning-rich work being made by Roger then.

For all the talk of modest means and humble approaches that often surrounds it, Roger's work, and especially its process, is full and brimming over with symbolic meaning generated by fundamental yet highly culturally digested elements. The sun, space, time, place, matter are all coerced into a beautiful narrative about a concentration of energy creating an overexposed photograph of the sun on a bit of

old wood; the interruption and slight alteration of the course of that energy on its way to earth, an interruption taking place just before it reaches the ground, occasioning the evidence. Impossible, I would have thought, not to find meaning in such a process.

I was a Painting student at Chelsea College of Art, London, between 1988 and 1991, when Roger was also teaching there. The programme at the time was housed in Manresa Road, just off the King's Road, and divided between the third and fourth floors of the building, with a few students occupying studios on the ground floor and a few more shipped out to Bagleys Lane in Fulham. But most were on the third and fourth floors. The fourth was for students making either minimal/conceptual painting or derivatives of this, or people making cerebral and generally hard-edged abstract painting. The third floor was for students making figurative work or engaging in more gestural and looser abstraction. Specific tutors were assigned to each of the floors and there was relatively little dialogue between floors, though students did come together for art history lectures.

Roger taught on the fourth floor. I had the opportunity to see Roger's teaching at close quarters without ever really being one of his students. We did have one or two tutorials but didn't develop the kind of relationship that he had with many of my friends at the time, who would be enraptured by the insights afforded through his wit, knowledge and focus. In many ways I wish that I had been taken on as one of his. I was a cerebral student, quite well read and ambitious, but also eager to try far too many things, and Roger was I think uninterested in artists with a promiscuous approach to their practice. He did not think it appropriate for one to try things out, as would be recommended in many inane tutorials with other tutors, but preferred instead for students to look within themselves to discover what it was meaningful to do.

I think there was a type of work that Roger seemed to favour in his students, though I don't believe his tastes were narrow. But generally those he spoke with would be involved in a kind of fuzzy minimalist approach or a warm conceptual engagement; he seemed to like process, to favour acts that spoke of a kind of devotion and

that generated an aesthetic one might be drawn to think of as humble or modest, as if it were not an aesthetic at all but a kind of visual inevitability. There was a sense that when he looked at this kind of work he was witnessing something that most people couldn't see. He had a view that in an age when one could make work out of anything at all, the choices one made about precisely and simply what to do were extremely significant. He claimed to be interested in regarding work at the edges of acceptability, things that might be overlooked and were unwanted, just in the way he liked to select the pieces of wood he used for his own work.

Tutorials with Roger were always quiet, intimate, one-to-one and intense. It often seemed as if they were an end in themselves, as if the conversation were not about making a palpable contribution to the development of someone's work, but to see whether the work, almost like a votive object, might sustain a conversation that would not lead to it being explained away. I heard an interview with Roger where he mentions considering that perhaps his work was actually the smoke given off when the light from his magnifying glass burned the wood; that perhaps, by focusing on the wood as an outcome of this process, he had been looking the wrong way and that it was in fact the escaping and ungraspable smoke that was the work. His tutorials were similarly potentially decentred, the object of the discussion not necessarily corresponding with the object of the work, making one feel that what was at stake in that moment was the intensity of the conversation and the depth of regard which Roger made people feel he had for them and their practice.

I never saw Roger deliver a formal lecture, though he did talk well in public and indeed often in private about his own work. He would very often make it seem anecdotal, starting with such comments as 'I just bumped into some old friends in the way in tonight and they reminded me of this really extraordinary thing...', the old friends felt good and the whole audience also felt that they were in for something heartfelt and genuine, which invariably they were, even if it was just an opportunity for Roger to rehearse his anecdotes. In this respect

Roger was a showman, extremely aware of the impact of his persona. His preferred method of teaching was the tutorial, a roughly hour-long conversation with a student in his or her studio, usually sitting or standing among or in front of one of their works, finished or in progress. Just before he retired from his teaching job he told me that all he came in to do now were tutorials; 'Doesn't get better than that does it...' he said, leaving not the slightest space for disagreement. The conversation often took place with other people in the space, but often also in private, and even when there were other people around, Roger's approach was to home in on the discussion in such a way that it felt as if a cocoon enveloped teacher and student, making it difficult for anyone else to hear what was being said. And I should know! I tried so hard to hear what he was saying, what magic words he was imparting to people from which I too might be able to benefit and act upon. But usually nothing, a voice too hushed to be heard beyond its intended recipient.

This form of teaching responded to what the student had done with insights, speculations, deviations and in some cases – though usually best avoided – even advice. It wasn't and still really isn't wise to give advice in a tutorial lest the student ignore it or, even worse, that they accept it and confront you afterwards with the plain banality of your suggestions. Better to leave things as a series of open ended speculations, and to rely on the fact that the student will see additional people and enjoy a range of views with which to agree or not and gradually adopt take their own synthesised position.

Roger spoke often about faith and belief, stating that in such an exciting and varied world it took a good deal of belief in oneself and one's work to carry it forward at all, and I think he probably looked for this evidence of people being centred as a way of identifying if they would be able to benefit from his teaching. This may well have been what prevented me and others like me from entering his circle – the fact that I made all too clear my ambivalence about the possibility of art. There were many of us for whom art, and especially art school, was a way not of following a strong impulse towards our work but of exercising what felt like a stronger impulse to steer away

from other things. I suppose our folly in many respects was to make anything at all when there was really nothing that we wanted to make – it seems to me now in fact that Roger would have been far more receptive to me if I had chosen to make nothing. But such was certainly not my level of maturity at the time, as it almost certainly isn't now, so that was really out of the question, and the line I took was almost subconsciously to parody all available approaches and test out what reactions people might have. Roger was on to me about this; he had my number. For some reason it fell to him to record how many tutorials people had with guest artists, and I remember him emerging from the staff office – those were the days when all the staff shared an office with a sofa, a table and a desk – one day chuckling heartily to himself as he told me that I was the student who had received by far the most tutorials from the broadest range of people that year. He identified my restlessness as a marked contrast to his own stated position of becoming fascinated by what came to him if he stayed still and in one place long enough.

There were a few different inflections to his voice. Sometimes he spoke through uproarious laughter, excited, childlike, at others he asserted a different toughness, a kind of steely attack that reminded one of his commitment and indeed his considerable international reputation. He could be very tough and unforgiving. One of the many metaphors he used in tutorials was that of 'blotting your copybook'. On one level this related to the work itself, to the fact that something done could not be undone, even if it were able to be rendered invisible it would still be there somehow – he had a great interest in invisibility. But the metaphor also seemed to apply to rules of general conduct, as an artist and a person. Perhaps that was why he was so careful, because he realised that once done, things could not be undone. That could seem quite harsh for those of us who were there to learn and not to be judged according to what we came with, for those of us who saw art as a way of being able to blot away, who might indeed consider the blot to be the most interesting and rewarding thing we could do with our already sullied copybook.

I think Roger's teaching was often about making people realise that their education in art was not to be geared towards learning how to make things but about how to be in the world as artists. When he famously advised people to make a piece of work to keep in a drawer or in their pocket, I think his point was to encourage students not to concern themselves with the spectacle of art or what they felt pressured and conditioned to think art should look like, but towards what might prove meaningful about it to them.

Perhaps it was inevitable that such a particular message or position should only have been available to those predisposed to run with it without significant resistance. I lament the fact that such an ostensibly radical or certainly particular position wasn't more widely tested; that Roger seemed content for his ideas to have limited reach and that he should have been content to operate alongside other artists and approaches for which he must have had little if any regard. I don't know why someone with his intelligence and influence in the institution of the art school wouldn't have sought to champion more significant and deep-rooted change on a much broader basis.

Developing confidence and self-belief, alongside doubt and the capacity for critical enquiry, are certainly key aspects of all forms of higher education. For many of Roger's students I believe the duration of the conversation with him was the moment when they felt this self-belief most acutely. I think he made people feel as if he recognised things in them that no one else had, and that he revealed things to them that seemed truer and more compelling than any they had heard before. As an outsider I remember craving the calm ecstatic state in which students emerged from his tutorials. I'm not certain that all students were able to carry this wisdom and serenity beyond the encounter of the tutorial, and I would guess that many craved the conversation with Roger way beyond their student days, finding the world beyond the art school to be far less receptive to them and their work. But Roger's teaching was not about preparing people for the rest of their lives, it was much more about helping them recognise the significance of the moment of exchange, to experience

the conversation and not necessarily resolve it or instrumentalise it into a series of action points for further consideration.

I can't help thinking about how this approach to teaching relates to the developing culture of British art schools. Roger is certainly not the only artist to have deployed a good deal of charisma and self-reference in his teaching, and these are important qualities in a subject where much rides on students' capacity to self-authorise their activity. But I also wonder how far we can really get by insisting on some ongoing sense of not-knowing as the basis for the activity, or indeed how wise it is to extol a sense of heightened individuality and profound intersubjectivity? The idea that it is possible just to experience without thinking, and to somehow leave language out of the room and resist interpretation is highly questionable. Even Richard Tuttle, an artist with whom I think Roger felt a strong affinity, stated in a talk at the Royal College of Art in 2015 that he believed language to be the fundament, the basis of all our experience. And I think Roger probably knew this too. He spoke very well, very economically; he would not answer questions but reply always thoughtfully and considerately with exactly what he might have wanted to say before the question was even asked.

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