

Guy Brett – presence, absence^I

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I Those notes in remembrance of Guy Brett were read by Luciana Brett England at Guy Brett's memorial on 26 October 2021 at Tate Modern.

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I cannot remember if I ever spoke to Luciana Brett, who has kindly agreed to read these short notes in remembrance of her father, Guy Brett. I must have been introduced to her at some point, when she accompanied her father, at exhibition openings, performances, or other art related occasions. One such event stands out in my memory amongst all others. It was the launch of Guy's book 'Carnival of Perception' which, if I'm not mistaken, was held at the Hayward Gallery.

The Hayward, only a few years earlier, had held one of the most outstanding exhibitions to take place in London this century. 'Force Fields: phases of the kinetic', represented the culmination of Guy's life-long engagement with kinetic art. A beautiful manifestation of his attentive way of looking at art, it was both broad in historical scope and specific in its approach, elegantly demonstrating how curating could operate outside the comfort of canonical certitudes. A similar sense of wonder overcame me as I viewed 'Takis', curated by Guy and Michael Wellen, more recently here at Tate Modern. An overview of the work of one of Guy's earliest interlocutors, it brought to light Takis' extraordinary poetic vision, and, in doing so, was itself an exhibition out of the ordinary. There was something about it that I can only describe as 'fresh', that brought what are now historic works of art, quite literally, back to life.

In the book 'Carnival of Perception', Guy described his own work as: 'a way of explaining the world, a form of thinking in materials, along a dialectic between their presence and their absence'. Seeing himself as an interpreter from the visual to the textual, Guy strode that thin line – the predicament of all good translators – that seeks equivalence in differences and difference in equivalences: presence and absence. At that book launch, a crowd composed of friends and gallery goers had assembled, forming a circle around Guy, who was saying a few words in his characteristically modest, shy, yet incredibly insightful way. Having struggled to find a spot from where I could hear him, I found myself standing behind Guy. Over his shoulders I could see Luciana, whose smile beamed the love, affection, and what I can only imagine to be an overflowing pride in her father: a smile that said more than words could possibly convey.

In revisiting that moment, other memories come flowing back. I remember one of the first comments Guy made to me, one that shook me to the core, that demanded not only an immediate response, which was disappointingly pragmatic, but sparked other longer lasting and more profound reflections. Guy had reluctantly agreed to act as advisor for my PhD on Hélio Oiticica.

I say reluctantly not because of the subject matter. Guy had championed Oiticica's work since the 1960s when the artist was barely known, even in Brazil. He organised Hélio's first international solo exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1969 and was amongst the curatorial team for his itinerant posthumous exhibition between 1992-94. Later, with Luciano Figueiredo, Guy curated 'Oiticica in London', here at Tate Modern in 2007.

I like to think that Guy's reluctance wasn't a reflection on my own ability either. Guy's subsequent support along the years disqualifies that self-deprecating inclination of mine. I have concluded that Guy's scepticism was directed at the authority attributed to a PhD, suggesting the possibility of other means of expressing the significance of an artist's work, of translating the work's presence and absence. Not wanting to dissuade me from the task, this was conveyed with the simplicity of a smile and the passing comment: 'you know, sometimes a short poem can say more than an entire academic thesis.' That observation stayed with me as I also realised, from the artists Guy was drawn to, that from the most ordinary of objects, the most radical, poetic gestures may arise.

Much has been written and theorised about the relation between art and life, its significance within the historic avant-gardes and how such attitudes re-emerged in the work of many artists during the course of the 1960s. Throughout his life Guy was drawn to these, often forming seemingly incongruous alliances. His live-long collaboration with David Medalla is undoubtedly the most obvious example. 'Friendship, that relation that separates', Maurice Blanchot's words encapsulate that reciprocity of difference. Early on in my own friendship with Guy, I was struck with admiration with the fact that he would attend the most improbable events, not caring for the prestige of the location or the art-world status of the artist or curator involved.

He used to be a regular guest at parties organised by our mutual friend Patricio Forester. An enthusiastic tango dancer, Patricio, defying the laws of spatial geometry, had fitted a grand piano into his small first-floor apartment. At such events, friends, some more musically talented than others, were invited to sing along to Tangos and other musical genres. About ten years ago, I attended one such party accompanied by my son, who must have been 7 or 8 at the time. At one point in the evening, I briefly left the party to fetch a bottle of wine at the nearby shop. On my return, I was shocked to find that my son had, in the meantime, orchestrated a transfiguration: the participatory sign-along had turned into a happening of a different sort...

a rowdy pillow fight. The scene would not have been out of place in Jean Vigo's 1933 film 'Zero de Conduit'. My surprise was not so much directed at the sight of general chaos – that was half-expected at Patricio's dos – I was astonished instead at the sight of Guy who, approaching his 70th birthday, pillow in hand, was one of the most enthusiastic participants.

It seems almost too trivial to state that Guy's presence – his writing, the legacy of his exhibitions, his vision of art as a kind of cosmic force – will remain for decades to come. His absence, on the other hand, will be sorely felt by those who were fortunate enough to have known that wonderful, generous man.

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