

Guy Brett – Memorial Tribute^I

Gilane Tawadros^{II}

I This tribute to Guy Brett was given at Guy Brett's memorial on 26 October 2021 at Tate Modern.

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The last time I saw Guy I bumped into him quite by chance in Regent's Park, almost exactly one year ago. In a wheelchair, he was accompanied by his carer on a passage through the park. Although constrained by the impact of Parkinsons on his body, Guy was, as always, warm, kind and engaging. It was a glorious autumn day: one of those days when you savour every small detail - the quality of the mellow, golden light, the soothing warmth of the air, the intensity of the autumn colours... acutely aware of the winter yet to come.

I can't remember the occasion when I met Guy for the **first** time but it was early on in my job as founding Director of inIVA in the mid-1990s. Guy came to one of inIVA's first events and brought me a gift - a copy of the catalogue of his seminal 1969 Hélió Oiticica exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. In that important and understated gesture, Guy was drawing a connection between his work in the preceding years and this new organisation called inIVA, reminding me of the internationalism which had flourished in the British art world in the 1960s long before inIVA had been established and in which, he was and continued to be, a key protagonist. He was also nudging me gently - although I didn't realise it at the time - towards a particular mode of thinking, writing and curating contemporary art which was Guy's distinctive hallmark: a quiet and radical approach that resisted the arbitrary separation of art and life and was drawn to the inherent contradictions in both; an acute understanding of the profound and unexpected possibilities and insights that artworks can unlock; both the cosmic and existential and simultaneously the political and subversive.

In his preface to *Carnival of Perception*, Guy's collection of exquisite essays on art, Yves-Alain Bois singled out one particular essay that he felt epitomised Guy's inimitable tone. In this essay, Guy reflects on why we sometimes find ourselves drawn repeatedly to certain images without at first knowing why; he asks himself why he finds himself drawn to images of angels in post-conquest Latin American Art and in particular, the deeply troubling and ambiguous image of the angel with a gun. "These images", wrote Guy, "were apparently 'popular' for different reasons, with both Christians and Latin Americans, with oppressor and oppressed. It is as if you could read in them simultaneously transcriptions of inducement, threat, coercion, protection, solace, yearning and resistance... The angel, with its brilliantly opulent but delicate clothing, its mobility, its freedom from hierarchical placing in the pictorial composition and its bisexuality, is an intimate image of enablement."

Yves-Alain doesn't come out and say it in so many words but the inference is clear: Guy himself was a kind of angel with a gun: a gentle, softly-spoken

and modest man, armed with a unique way of seeing, writing and curating that was powerful, precisely-aimed and potentially explosive. Armed in this way, Guy championed the work of a number of artists, many of whom had remained for decades under the radar of the wider art world. Guy's exhibition of the Brazilian artist Oiticica at the Whitechapel was a turning point for both Guy and Oiticica. The then Director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery Bryan Robertson, had agreed to host Oiticica's show following the unexpected closure of Signals Gallery in London but then took issue with how the artist wanted to present his work in the gallery. At the heart of the disagreement that transpired between Guy and Bryan Robertson was a significant clash of approaches in curating: on the one hand, Robertson's traditional and academic 'connoisseurship' which fetishised the artwork as a unique object to be studied and appreciated, and on the other, Guy's profound understanding and insight into the radical premise of Oiticica's art practice whose works fused art and life, collapsed the distinctions between thinking and feeling and dissolved the boundaries between artist and audience.

The relationship between art and life was a persistent concern for Guy as it was for the artists whom he admired – Oiticica and Clark but also David Medalla, Rose English, Juan Davila, Takis, Mona Hatoum, João Penalva, Susan Hiller, Cornelia Parker, Eugenio Dittborn, Rose Finn-Kelcey and Li Yuan-chia. I remember watching Guy install Li Yuan-chia's *Cosmic Points* in the first major exhibition of Li's work that he curated. In the 1960s, Li had begun fabricating his *Cosmic Points* as round wood discs, backed by a magnetic pad so that they were detachable, autonomous objects that could be moved about and rearranged by the spectator. The *Cosmic Point* was not an object but a proposition about space and time and the artist insisted that they could be anything the viewer wanted them to be – "a flight of birds, a cathedral a necklace, a political meeting, lunch." Guy wanted the presentation of Li's *Cosmic Points* in the exhibition at Camden to have the same power of possibility that Li had intended. He was acutely aware of the difficulty of re-presenting works after the artist had passed away or significant time had elapsed and artworks risked becoming ossified, mere husks of what the artist had created. When he made exhibitions, re-making artworks and re-staging installations, Guy sought to re-activate the creativity which existed at the point at which the artwork had originally been made and the dynamic three-way relationship between artist, artwork and spectator. The care and love with which Guy attended to the task of re-creating Li's works, breathing a second life into them, is what made Guy's exhibitions so compelling and exciting, as though you were seeing the works in the moment

that they were made, even if those works had been created decades earlier. He was able to do this because of the profound insight which he had into an artist's work, the deep immersion into their world of art and ideas, and the exquisite entanglement of thinking, feeling and understanding between artist and curator.

Before becoming a curator, Guy was an art critic and a precocious one at that. His first text was as a schoolboy on the painter Maurice de Vlaminck; his first paid job as a cub reporter on the *Yorkshire Post*. He went on to become art critic at *The Times* from 1964 to 1983, moving on to become visual arts editor at the London weekly magazine *City Limits*. Guy was an intellectual in every sense, hugely knowledgeable, extremely well-read but his writing – like the man himself – eschewed grand gestures, over-elaborate language and heavy theorising. He wrote elegantly and with huge generosity to his readers. “Art is a way of explaining the world,” he wrote, “a form of thinking in materials, along a dialectic between their presence and their absence. I would like to be seen as one of the interpreters of these non-verbal discourses in words.” Following the artist Rose English, he aspired “to be an expert at not being an expert.” What that meant for Guy and for all of us who have benefitted from his work, is that he was a consummate ‘doubter’, not taking as given what the art world deemed as important or worthy of attention, remaining open-minded and curious about every new artist or artwork he encountered, taking the time to discover for himself without being influenced by others’ opinions or judgements: “I have always wished to position myself as an open-minded observer,” said Guy, “rather like the ingenuous adventurers in picaresque novels who encounter situations along the way and respond to them as they can, or will.”

Guy's travels led him to explore continents of artistic practice (Latin America and Asia) as well as ideas and practices (concrete poetry, kinetic art), using his writing and his exhibition-making as a means to prise open the canon of contemporary art and insert ways of thinking and seeing the world that had often been ignored or marginalised. Guy's travels also brought him in touch with the radical politics of the Global South. Aside from Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, the artist who had the most profound influence on Guy was David Medalla, his friend and fellow traveller. It was a relationship that spanned decades from school through to Signals London to Artists for Democracy and then through to the end of their lives, David Medalla's writings, artworks and perhaps most importantly how David lived being an artist, his “general attitude” to art and everyday life had a significant impact on Guy:

“Is it possible for an artist today to have a different sort of *presence* from that offered by the clanking machines of biennales and Documentas, the discreet white cubes of metropolitan galleries, the corporate marketing strategies of museums, the celebrity slots of the media? Is it possible to escape, or at least pierce holes, in some of this mediation and achieve a more direct, more human, relation to the public? Can an artist be known, and valued, as a collaborator and galvaniser of others as much as an individual author?”

Guy was speaking of David Medalla. But he could have as easily been speaking about himself. And of course it was possible. David Medalla epitomised it as an artist. Guy epitomised it as a writer and curator, treading lightly through the world but leaving a deep and indelible mark.

Gilane Tawadros, 26 October 2021

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