

INTERVIEW OF ARTIST C.C. ELIAN BY ART CRITIC JULIA MORTON

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Intro: (Erik Satie's Gymnopedie No. 2 in background)

Art Matters. Art isn't just for objects; it's also our original state of being. Featuring an interview of conceptual artist C.C. Elian by art critic and curator, Julia Morton; a meeting of two minds onto one subject-Art.

JM = JULIA MORTON

CCE = C.C. ELIAN

0:00:00 JM -- Hi. I'd like to start by asking you to simply describe your best known work to date.

0:00:05 CCE -- The script is a codification of the Roman alphabet, so it's basically the tic-tac-toe grid and then the alphabet is inserted in it, and from that you can write in English but the structure is the same as Asian calligraphies, which is to say with lines and marks or dots.

The system is very simple; it takes about 15 minutes to learn because the hard part of learning the alphabet, and how to spell words has already taken place essentially.

0:00:47 JM -- What, what made you choose script, as a form of art? What was it about that?

0:00:51 CCE -- It's just one thing led to another; and I think most artists will keep a workbook and then, they'll write notes in it, and I found that if I left the notebooks around then people would tend to go through them, and as a means of privacy I started to codify it, and I started with the a Russian alphabet because it's very phonetic, but then my English spelling deteriorated so I needed to find another system. And what's really interesting is how it evolved; it just took on a life of its own.

0:01:27 JM -- Had you studied Chinese calligraphy at all or did that become a part of your process of creation?

0:01:33 CCE -- Not studied *per se*. As with most people, I looked at it and there was such an abstraction to the line that, as an artist, I was really fascinated because, you can look at Asian calligraphy from 1800 years ago or something written yesterday, and there's a similar freshness to it; you can't really tell when it was written because there's something so abstract and pure about a line on a surface.

And, that when I saw my script go in that direction, I realized I could have the same expressive process as someone writing with an Asian writing system but I didn't have to learn how to speak Chinese, or Japanese or Korean, I could stay within my own culture, and the reason for that is because Asian writing systems do represent their language, but it's their physical structure when you write them that allows for the looseness of Asian calligraphy, and the *Eliau* script is made out of the same elements of lines and dots, also the same materials 'cause you're using pen or brush and ink.

0:02:58 JM -- Un, hun. Uh hun.

0:03:00 CCE -- ... and I think one of the reasons it has that impact or is visually attractive is because a line and marks are very archetypical summations of something, because with a graph you can represent any point in motion, and also how that line was formed, so when you look at a line there's really nowhere for the, for the writer to hide.

0:03:29 JM -- You've said that your writing combines both left and right brain, a left and a right brain approach to writing. What does that mean to you and how does that work in your work?

0:03:43 CCE -- That observation came after the fact, because the framing of writing systems into left hemisphere or right hemisphere is recent.

Most people just take their writing system for granted and they figure that's the way it works, but the more the neuro-imaging occurs, the more

they realize that they're different kinds of activities in the brain according to what writing system you use, and as a result, depending on the writing system, your entire worldview and measure of how things work is influenced by the kind of writing system; and they did some really interesting studies for it..

JM – Un, hun.

0:04:35 CCE -- What they did is they took a group of Asian people and showed them a glass made out of concrete, you know, like cement, and they showed the same object to Westerners. Then, they showed them an actual glass and a block of concrete and asked each group which of those objects was most like the object they had just seen.

About 80% of the Asian people picked the concrete block because they viewed things as a group, and the Westerners in equal proportion picked the actual glass, because they looked at the individual object.

JM -- Un, hun.

0:05:14 CCE -- And so you can see how that skews everything in one direction or another, and the fact that my system combines both methods is because it's still based on that linear spelling of English, but because you have a lot of choices of composition you're also drawing --- which is similar to what an Asian calligraphy is, its, you know, an abstract drawing.

JM -- Un, hun.

0:05:41 CCE -- And so you can say that the Asian calligraphy is a kind of Abstract Expressionism, just like the art movement here, only Asian calligraphies, of course, express something specific because it's writing words, and also their writing system is expressing a certain philosophical point of view, which is reflected in the system, and it's also reflected throughout the culture.

JM -- Un, hun.

0:06:12 CCE -- But I thought that this same kind of way of looking at things, this conceptualization could be expressed through

English also, but you had to have a flexible enough writing system in order to do it -- and this script is that, I mean it is flexible enough.

And as I've said it also allows for more complications of writing and of choice while you're writing than Asian logograms do, because their line relationships are fixed, whereas with this system you have to make a lot of choices while you're writing.

0:06:56 JM -- And how do you think that being both left and right, how does then your writing system affect someone who say decides to try it out, what is your hope--say it's a Westerner who picks up your system and tries to write out of a few sentences?

0:07:14 CCE -- Well, my hope for anyone using this system is that they experience the same thing, um, that I did which is to realize that words are constructions, but that they're also made out of these basic raw materials, and that if you look closely enough at that fact you realize that you can go past the spaces -- that this material is full of spaces and, it's not that you lose sight of what a word represents, but you realize that it's an extraction from a reality that is much more basic, and that it's also very closely related to art because it's made out of the same geometric and textural forms as art.

So at the same time you always understand what a word is about, but you also realize that there's a much more, um, direct contact with reality, and that this reality doesn't strip you of your socialization--if anything, it makes you much more confident because you're actually getting back to your basic mind, if I can, you know, term it that way and when...

I know when I use this system something different occurs, and what I think occurs ---because I've noticed that my ability to write with my left hand has increased--- because I use the system a lot. I like the freedom of it, because the constraint of linearity when you write with Roman letters in English, there's a real constraint, because as soon as you deviate from the baseline you're considered less than fully functional.

When you write with this system you *have* to coordinate both sides of your brain because you're making decisions on the fly that aren't predetermined for you. So you have a much greater enhancement of both hemispheres--which is what I think people try to have, you know, a balanced perception. But if you only develop one aspect of yourself you're not going to fully appreciate a perspective that's dependent on the other hemisphere.

0:09:37 JM -- Right. It's interesting too, that because you're writing actual words its not, as free as drawing, or doodling, you're actually, you have a goal in mind to get that word written, and the constructs of that word, but at the same time --I've seen it in your examples where you show how a word can be interpreted in different ways or can be written in different ways, um and then is interpreted emotionally, when you look at that word, its significance if its tight or loose, or whatever...

0:10:12 CCE – Exactly, there's, there's a certain *je ne sais quoi* about this assembly of lines and dashes, and I think it's because it gets close to resembling music or dance, there's... The abstraction of it makes you feel that you could be liberated at any moment from the actual concrete representation that a word represents...

0:10:38 JM -- Right. It does have a kind of dance form to it; I'm looking at a piece of your work now and the... while they are not pictograms, they have such verve to the motion that, as you read up and down the lines, they appear to be dancing in front of you in a sense.

0:10:57 CCE – Uh hum, you're right and that's because they have... there's a lot of play in them--at the same time, as you point out, you are writing actual words and that makes all the difference between just doing an abstract line across a page -- which is what most Western artists have worked with, for example Mark Tobey with his "white writing" because the Roman alphabet writing system doesn't really allow for that .

And, so if you wanted, as an artist, to work with this very free line, but one that was also expressing a word, then you probably had to learn an

Asian language and writing system in order to do it – because, the fact that you're starting with a concept, and you're ending with it and that you've expressed yourself in the meantime, is going to determine your relationship to that concept, and the starkness of the line is also going to reveal the quality of that relationship.

And with the *Eliau* script you can-- within an afternoon-- you can be on your way to working with that kind of creative process, because as I've said, you already know how to spell and have learned the alphabet, and so you can put your energies into the quality of your, of your line, and your composition.

And this system also, I wanna say “forces you,” but in a way you can, you can term it like that, because it obligates you to make decisions about compositions, and line ratios, and how many baselines you're going to use while you're writing, so that if you're working with a word that has, you know, more than a handful of letters you can have hundreds of possible compositions. I mean, it sounds complicated, but it's actually very simple and I've seen kids, you know, adolescents, learn this system in a few minutes.

0:13:18 JM – Can you tell me, and this is sort of an obvious question, but maybe not so obvious, why is this art, why is a form of writing, or a kind of code, why is that art?

0:13:29 CCE – Well, you're right to ask that from a Western point of view because since a writing system is utilitarian, in the West anything of that nature when it's refined, it's not seen as a high art so much as a craft, whereas in the East writing systems are undoubtedly considered high art. In China, if I'm not mistaken, calligraphy is placed above painting as an art form.

We readily agree in the West that their writing system is a form of high art, and I think it's, you know, because we respond to the line jazz of it, because there's something just so timeless about this trace of a point going through space.

0:14:28 So, for me it's definitely art, and whether others agree is a cultural decision beyond my control. I can only function as an individual artist and the culture is going to do what it does.

And being able to enter a space for the reason that it's there, is part of what art is. I think art is about freedom... to act in a society without being compelled to function in any discernible way, which I think is one of the reasons that the value of artwork takes on these astronomical sums is because, you can't really measure the value of that freedom.

JM – Right.

0:15:51 CCE -- Then there are those people, because I've come across forum or small articles on the Internet of other people who use my script in their own way, and I never hear about what they do. Every once in a while, they'll put their own sample up -- which I find very gratifying, because one person does everything backwards, which is possible; I mean this script you can actually rotate it through all the quarter sections of 360°-as long as you're consistent.

And that's the beauty of, one of the beauties of it, and I think its simplicity is also what makes it possible for its practitioners to move things around. And, I, I myself am still discovering new dimensions to this system, and I'm not qualified to a practice all of them because I'm not a calligrapher in the true sense of the word; I just write the way I write, and the system by its inherent calligraphy will help me along.

0:17:24 JM – It's true, watching and in looking at your website as I scroll down through your explanation of the script, it was wonderful to see how I could -- even for myself -- imagine beginning to use it, and how I would think about writing, and what then I would want to try and say, and then I began actually playing with how does my name look like, what does.. And so it is, it's interesting how we take something so for granted, writing, so accustomed to writing a certain way and getting in the line. It was very liberating as I began writing my name in your script and then reorganizing

how I wanted it to look, according to some aesthetic values that I have. It was a lot of fun to try it.

0:18:11 CCE -- Well, I'm glad to hear you use that word "liberating" because every writing system really reflects a cultural mindset -- the boundaries of behavior that's sanctioned or that is prohibited. And linear writing systems really do have this constraint, because if you've noticed: you have to conform the proportions...

JM -- Right, right,

0:18:37 CCE -- You have to spell "correctly" and I'm of that school where the dictionary records, it does not dictate, and I even wrote to the President of *The Spelling Society* and asked him, you know, is there official spelling for things, and he said "No" there's variation and, because you can spell the way you want, it's just that you, in a Western society that's not going to be rewarded. You're going to be seen as the eccentric that you are...

JM -- Right.

0:19:16 CCE -- in relationship... but this writing system, by its structure, has a great deal of freedom, and because the elements of it are really self similar. I mean, you're taking sections of a grid, so they're all going to have corners, or relationship...

JM -- Right, right.

0:19:36 CCE -- So you can also correct yourself with much more grace than trying to turn and "F" into an "A," you know, once you start. So it has these little subtleties that, at least, help you save face *vis à vis* yourself. And when, I had that experience for the first time -- it took me years to get to the point, where I was completely immersed in the world of the script itself, because I was looking at something, in a hallway, and it was a painting, and it triggered something, so I started to write it in my script, and it was the first time that I hadn't first gone to the Roman letters and then moved into the script itself. I just went to that script directly and I

realized I was in a culture... that was very forgiving, you know, I didn't have to worry about all of these linear and proportional constraints and...

0:20:42 JM -- Forgiving, and also encouraging, because as you, I was writing I felt myself encouraged to try different things, to try it again, to write again, to see if I could it a different way, to see if I could do it a little... not better or worse, but begin to develop how I was creating an aesthetic image as opposed to just writing a word.

0:21:02 CCE – Exactly, yeah, that's part of it because, as you say, you're writing a word *and* you're also drawing. It's not a better, or worse way, it's just something that's different, and that's part of the culture that I hope this writing system encourages -- one where you're in discovering your own potential while you're also functioning.

And I think in part it's because writing is about writing *something* but if you feel subservient to the word, you're going have a much harder time challenging even your own thoughts. Whereas, if you realize that a word, again, is a construction, that when you disassemble it you realize that, more often than not, you're the one that gave it its influence over you, and so that encouragement is also related to challenging what a word represents.

And if you can see, while you're writing, that you have actually many different options of relationships to that word, then the relationship becomes much more balanced because a word also has different applications depending on its own context.

0:25:33 JM – The issue of privacy is increasingly an important issue for us individually, and for us as a culture, as world of people where we more and more know about each other, and find less and less space for ourselves. You've spoken about your work as providing privacy for one to claim one's own space, in a sense because it is a code, and a code that is so affected by one's own form of expression, one's own aesthetics.

Was that one of the underlying goals of your work was to create a form that allowed for privacy? You've mentioned before that you had

written it as a way to hide your thoughts from people who were prying through your open notebooks, for example.

0:26:21 CCE -- Right. And it did provide privacy for awhile, but now that I've published the code...

(Laughter by both)

JM – Damn ~

CCE – It's ironic, you know, everything if you continue in it, turns into its opposite, so now the thing that I had as my own private space, its success is if it becomes public--and its, it's a wonderful thing, I mean, I love that aspect of it. But I think, privacy is a way also of having space within oneself

And as an example, this writing system demonstrates that you can step outside of your known system, and still function, and maybe function even better because you understand that there are other options; and so the privacy that I see this script offering is an increase of internal space--which is a much neglected thing--unless you cultivate it as part of a spiritual practice. But I think it's just as useful in ordinary life to have room within yourself where you can stand from another point of view, and interact with what you have to interact with anyway. And so I think of the privacy that this offers in those terms, because if you have privacy that means you can go to another space that no one can take from you; and so it's equivalent to say you've increased the space within yourself,

JM – Right.

0:27:59 CCE -- And you can go there, and still maintain your foothold into whatever it is you have to do. And so I think in that respect it increases privacy...

0:28:11 JM -- And interestingly enough, in your private space then you're given space to consider the public world, and issues in the public world that you deal with as a private person.

In your explanation, again back to your website and its explanation of your script, you mention the importance, at least in Chinese writing, of

effective group dynamics. And in postmodernism they have argued that there really is no such thing as a reliable history, or a single way to read a work of art, sort of maybe dismissing, in a sense, the notion of group dynamics—that it's always dependent on your group how you read, or what you believe.

Can you explain why your visual art, you are a postmodernist, you are a conceptualist. Why you believe that your visual art ability to communicate clearly is so important?

0:29:04 CCE – Starting with the group dynamics--you know all those people who write about postmodernism probably drove on the road that, you know, multiple tax dollars paid to construct. I think that there's a point beyond which it can't be every individual point of view rules. It's just, at a certain level that can be true, and you can have someone who has more insight into, let's say, a history or a text and maybe they're closer to the mark.

So you could have works that on the surface seem to represent something specific, for example Picasso's work Guernica, or somebody's portrait, and you can say this is what the work is about. And that's true as far as the artist is concerned, or its end goal but somebody can come in and talk about how, how it was done and also the politics that led to it being done, so different points of view are going to be inevitable.

But isn't the point of the art work once it leaves the artists hands, and that includes text, for each person to enter into it in their own way? Because the artist is *done*... (JM – Right.. right) and the value to the artist is the process, (JM – right,) and once you've, you've gone through the process as an artist, your own climax is over, so to speak.

JM -- You may never even see the art again....

0:30:44 CCE – You may never see the art again. I mean I don't look at... I don't have any art. I rarely look at my own artwork once it's done and then every once in awhile, whatever's left, I look at it and I'll go "Oh, that's really cool" because what I see in it is more than what I saw in it

during the process, because I was so engaged in the process that I didn't actually see the work in an objective way...

0:31:11 JM – Right, it's only later that you can look at it with some distance.

0:31:15 CCE – Exactly, and so even I can't give you a definitive response as to what the work is about, because what it *is* about is what it took to get there, and unfortunately, that's an individual experience.

0:31:34 JM -- But ultimately you feel its important that the work communicate in a form that isn't limitless, in the sense that there is something you're trying to achieve, a goal visually, a goal conceptually, as opposed to some of the others in the world of conceptualism who, where in fact the art disappears once the performance is over, or something like that. For you the work remains and it continues to allow access from a public who may or may not have read your statement.

0:32:04 CCE -- Right because the effect of the individual work as a precise communication of the artist's intention is a finite experience, because sooner or later it's given that more artwork is going to take its place in the perception of anyone--whether it's a historian or an individual. What's left, if anything is left, is an extraction (JM – Right,) and so you've got Warhol's 15 minutes, which I just helped propagate once again, and you've got Pollock's splashes, and you've got Rembrandt as, you know the quintessential artist, and Leonardo is the genius, and Michelangelo is the Sistine Chapel, and their images are on polyester shirts, and Van Gogh, right, and so in the end you still become a cultural essence or, you know, you disappear under the waves.

0:33:01 JM – Well that's an interesting point that you make, because as I'm sure you've seen, and many people have seen, *Home and Garden* television often features decorating shows that feature people making art, out of whatever object is at hand, or a piece of fabric, or something they stretch over a canvas. With everyone encouraged to

become an artist how do artists, professional artists or even amateurs, how do they maintain their importance to a culture?

0:33:28 CCE -- Well, you know that's a collective gestalt to determine how an artist is going to be, remain afloat as a valuable entity, and as a unique entity. Because for the artist it doesn't matter what they're doing--whether they're making muffins or they're making ceilings in chapels, their, the intensity, the depths, and the significance of the experience is equivalent, in my view, because they're all opening up the doors of perception--so speak--and they're all straining to their capacity to extend their reach into those deeper levels of... Creation. I mean that's what you're working with as an artist, no matter what you're doing, it's the creation of something that is emerging from you; and that's the mystery and that's the power of the artistic process, it's because if you weren't doing it... it wouldn't appear.

0:34:35 So the fact that everything is art, is implying that everyone is an artist, and I think, as Martha would say, "that's a good thing," because you can't continue with all the examples of people living a fulfilled life... in all these reality shows, and you go "how did they ever get that mansion? I mean are there so many people that have access to this lifestyle?" and the liberation that that offers. With so many examples of a quasi-fulfilled life, at least on the surface, people want to have more. But if everybody's trying to live a lifestyle that uses up, you know, 30% of the earth's resources for 5% of the population, it's not sustainable. And it isn't sustainable because it's based on this outward accumulation. So you're working with a finite quantity, and I think in the future the wealth will also be measured in terms of inner resources, and in order to do that, people will have to find something to do with their inner life, not just put out a reflection of what they've accumulated outwardly.

0:35:56 But what is sustainable is... for each person to realize that they have creative potential--if they want to tap into it—it's like a, it's a no obligation potential. And the artists who think that it diminishes their

own individual importance, I would say it actually just raises the bar so that if you have significance for the society as a whole, as an artist, than what you're expressing is something that's on a much grander scale than before so that your materials are much more challenging, because it might be for example like Christo, and his gates, and his curtains, with Jeanne Claude (JM -- Yes.)

Yes, and also a very important aspect but underplayed because in those days the male dominated the art scene, and so it's only recently, if I'm correct, that her name is included although we all know she was there all along.

But his method of doing art, which he said the best part was getting the city councils to give permission to place, you know, unorthodox elements onto the landscape. I think he is the precursor of the kind of art that will be significant in the future. For example there are those waterwalls in New York, right, I don't know if you saw them, you know the ones under the Brooklyn Bridge...

JM -- No, no I didn't see those...

CCE -- These are works on grand scale, and so those artists are significant for the society because it requires great resources. And so maybe the significant artist of the future is the one that's going to be working as part of a group, as part of a collaborative and they provide the vision and then the rest of the group provides the resources and the authorities, and so on.

0:38:04 JM – Right. In a sense that's true, isn't it, we look at a work of art or a style of art comes along and it affects us widely, over time, until we look back at that art and see it as a representation, not only of that artist and of those art movements, but of the era, the colors, the subjects and whatnot.

I think one of the things I find particularly interesting about, again, about the script—and then I'd like to get on and talk about some of the other forms of art that you work with—but in closing on the script, as often as not

I'll look at a show, or in a museum, an exhibition, and I leave and whatever thoughts are with me are my thoughts, but I never go home and think "Hmm, I wonder if I can paint like that person painted, or I wonder if I can sculpt like that person sculpts."

But with your work, I literally could take a lesson, and then begin my own interpretation, begin my own trial. And that's a unique experience, even for me, because it allowed me to see through your eyes, in a sense, to for a moment... see through your eyes but then your eyes became mine and I was able to sort of jump to the next level and began then to use your script as my own, as my own form and so I thought that was a particularly unique creation, or a unique outcome of your work was that, instead of just looking at the work and being the passive viewer, I actually had the opportunity to step into the artist's shoes and, in a sense, practice my own thinking and working as an artist approaching it that way.

0:39:56 CCE – Well, it's gratifying to hear that, because I think highly of it, but it's a little bit like telling everyone how talented your kids are and then eventually, and then finding that people actually do agree with you. Because what it is, it's not an art work in the traditional sense but it's like creating an instrument, and other people can use that instrument and you don't know what they're going to compose with it. So I think of it, a writing system--it's a system and a system is a tool of....

0:40:30 JM – Right, right... but it's interesting because it is so open ended, because so much of conceptual work is meant to be open ended, and openly read, but your work truly is actively open. I can pick it up and actually use it, and go on into my own life. As you say you have people using this script and you have no idea what they're doing with it

I'd like to ask about some of the other forms of art that you create.

0:40:58 CC -- Besides communicating about the scripts for others, I use it myself to do large artworks or drawings--in which I compose most of the material--usually its observations, or poems, or songs--which I did especially in the early years.

And also there's work with the Chromatic Alphabet which is something I came up with that is based on the absorption, or on the emission spectrum of the visible light spectrum; and, besides that there's also the video paintings.

0:41:42 JM -- If you could talk a little bit more about, let's start with videos.

0:41:45 CCE -- Well the videos, as many things that I started doing, were a side, an offshoot of wanting to have some, a different kind of activity, using different synapses than what I usually use, and I used to do photography for many years, but quit doing it because I had become basically a camera and I couldn't stop framing things.

So when I discovered video--thanks to a friend who did do video paintings--I realized I could use what I'd learned with photography and add motion to it ,and also with the flats screen televisions the notion that a screen can become a window and show a view anywhere into the world was really fascinating to me because I think that's the way it's going.

JM – Un, hun.

CCE -- And so I started to do for sheer entertainment and distraction, these video paintings, and just got into them more, and submitted them to a channel in Germany, that, *Souvenirs from Earth*, that shows only art videos.

0:43:03 JM – Now are working on a distinctive style, or are you working in a distinctive style, or with a specific subject matter, or are or you animating your script, for example, or what are your videos about?

0:43:14 CCE – They're about framing, because I think that art, the potential for art, is everywhere if you have the proper--and I don't like to use that word in its official sense—but if you have an effective framing (JM – Right.) which is what do you extract, what do you minimize, and what you maximize.

And so the videos that I do have a painterly aspect, as I see it, because they're not intended to be Hallmark-ish in the sense of being a

completely safe view. There's always this implication that this is the light that's come out of a potential darkness--as I see it--and so whether that can be communicated to somebody else which is the measure of the effectiveness of the work itself is the skill. And I think that's what separates a professional artist from someone who is doing it for their own, um, entertainment .Not, that the process is any more valuable, but the standard of effectiveness is more of a rigorous when you're being a professional artists.

0:44:30 JM – I would even include in that, even amateur artists because I think really the demarcation line is whether you are dabbling and just sort of playing for a moment, or you're taking seriously the kind of questions that arise when you begin looking at a blank canvas, or a videotape, or whatever it is that's empty and needs to be filled, or cutaway, or whatever, but it seems that, that's sort of the weeds from the roses as people begin, whether they're amateurs or professionals, or just accidental artists, when they begin to actually take on some of the questions and issues that arise with the creation of anything new.

0:45:13 CCE – Yes, and it wouldn't even, it doesn't even need to be termed as “amateur” or “professional.” It's like if you get into the filter. You know, the filter of the art market or art institutions such as museums, are you going to be, is your perception and your activity refined enough to go to the next stage.

JM – Right.

CCE -- How many filters are you going to be able to get through,

JM – Right.

0:45:39 CCE -- And, because very often amateurs are some of the most expert practitioners of something because they have the freedom--they don't have to make it pay off.

0:45:49 JM – Right, right. Exactly. And/or become a tool of the system and, and, not to hold to their own sense of what it is they want to accomplish. Why does art matter, what is the purpose of art in society

today? We have so much of it out there. We've got HG TV teaching everyone to be an artist. Why does art matter still, to, it obviously does. HG TV is teaching people to hang art on their walls in order to live a better life. But why does art matter today, why does it matter to you, or do you think it matters to make it matter to a general public, instead of just working in your studio by yourself, creating whatever you want; to hell with the audience?

0:46:34 CCE – Well, I definitely think that art does matter and, it matters to the individual, but then you know, it's going to add up to the collective of the society, if you have an interest to do it. Not just because there is a sense of adventure in art, but because the more you develop it, the more you become aware that everything is made out of those same basic shapes from which we build up art. It's just that we tend to use the functionality of their other configurations, whereas art gives us permission to let, let loose, so to speak.

And so you have to make art important in your own activities, and support it in the society because, um, otherwise there are so many other compelling social activities that you can say “Well, making money matters—more.” And so anything that doesn't, that isn't lucrative is of no interest.

But art, the practice of art and the perception of art requires the whole being, which other functions in society don't. And, I think if you don't include the whole being sooner or later you're going to have to an imbalance whether the person is, you know, feeling dismally dissatisfied, or you have uninspired products, or you have a sense of a disengagement from your environment.

0:48:13 When you get to practice art or appreciate art, it opens areas within yourself that can't be opened by anything else. And those societies where art does matter seem far more balanced, for example, Indonesian societies--in some respects not in others because they are inequities there. But for the individual to have a place where they can

expand themselves, as defined by their own terms not by anybody else, means they're going to open themselves up to their full capacity of creativity. And as such they're going to be happier people. And the studies, now, show that if you're happy you're going to make the next person happy, and that happiness is going to spill over to 2°.

And what's really interesting in terms of the books that are coming out, nonfiction, is the rise of the value of emotions--thanks to all the neuro imaging that's going on, which is a definitive description of what happens when you perceive something.

And, so it's, looking at it from an artist's point of view, it's like the rise of the Yin. That inner world is taking on value so that, not only is it important to be emotional, or not important, not only is it *actual* that people are emotional, but it's essential.

Whereas in the past you know, the emotion was relegated to the female side of things and...

JM -- Or the irrational side which was frightening...

0:50:08 CCE – Yeah, the irrational and how really inconvenient because it interfered with efficiency. Well in the long run, efficiency, an emphasis on efficiency interferes with efficiency. And so it's natural that if you open up these, what I term “yin spaces,” you're going to need to express the activity that's going on in that inner world.

I know that if I don't do some kind of project that I start to get very edgy, and uncomfortable, because there is all of this energy and expression that doesn't have anywhere to go.

0:50:52 JM – I think one of the... I speak for a lot of lay people when I say that I think there's in contemporary art, there is so much, and so much that is intentionally obscure and open to a limitless series of interpretations that it's difficult for people, people are afraid of art, it's... artists are afraid of art, art lovers are afraid of art. They're never really sure if their point of view is right or wrong.

They can listen to music, or you can ask them what kind of music do you like and they'll tell you "I like this, but I don't like this about that..." or "I like the following musics but I don't like these." When it comes to art and I ask that same question "What kind of art do you like?" people often apologize for not knowing enough about art, or being uncomfortable with contemporary art, not liking it. And it seems that the critical component has been rejected by the contemporary art world. It's not up to the artist to make themselves understood, it's up to the viewer to understand.

And that's a unique situation; in theater, in film, in music, the listener, or the viewer is allowed a different point of view.

How important do you think that is, that issue of critical interpretation; the ability for the public to critically have a voice, a critical voice in the viewing of art.

0:52:30 CCE – Well, anytime somebody feels that they can't trust their own perception....Because I think most people do know what they like something or not they're....

JM – They're made to feel badly, (CCE – Exactly...) that pile of dirt, and they don't think it's interesting, for example. They're made to feel that "Well, it's *you* that's not interesting," and not that this pile of dirt is not great art.

0:52:56 CCE -- Well that's an interesting point you make, and it's true that the audience in a performance or with music, votes with the their purchase of a ticket, and the price of a ticket is very small compared to the cost of a unique piece of artwork.

And so there's going to be a shift by from that pile of dirt from where it is in, you know, thousands of backyards and what happens to it once it's inside of a gallery; its significance has been translated. And what has shifted is the value of that pile of dirt and its significance to those people who bank on their investment in art. Because, if there was no price tag to that pile of dirt then everybody's opinion of it would be a democratically equal. But it's, if I'm going to pay \$1 million to have that dirt pile

transported to my estate, then I have to imbue it with a certain kind of mystique and that's the spin.

I think the art world is full of spin, and part of that spin is the sense of the exclusivity. And it may be that you need to appreciate why Carl Andre's, you know, bricks or floor tiles is sculpture, in order to agree that it's worth whatever figure its worth. But that's because you're part of a certain group who's going to invest in it; but in fact you can trust your own opinion if something appeals to you or not. The fact of an artwork having value from a historical, an art historical point of view, is a completely separate issue. And if the average person's opinion matters then the collector has no basis for a vast investment; so you have to create a reason for that to be valuable....

And in a sense it is, because it's opening up the perception that before was closed to that thing. Before Carl Andre said this is sculpture too--and I think he was working on the railroad, I mean he was inspired to see that is sculpture because he was an artist working with those materials as part of the job. If he, now if he had been working as a stockbroker and found those bricks and called them art...

0:55:44 CCE -- Because the people who work materials every day they see the poetics...

JM -- The beauty in them...

CCE -- but they have to also keep moving.

JM -- Right.

CCE -- Whereas he could stop and contemplate, and I think that's what art does: it stops the flow so you can be in the moment and recognize--as we usually do when children--that this is an amazing place, without any definition to it. The fact that it is, is stunning. And being able to perceive the world from that point of view, it puts things in proportion so that you don't get lost in the minutia of, you know, a clunky existence.

You realize that whatever you are doing, now, is part of a much grander picture; and when you open yourself up in that way you're also

open to other influences that inspire you and guide you, to change your life so that you can include more art in it--more art in terms of perception, not objects necessarily.

0:56:56 JM -- You talk a lot about perception, and that's certainly a cornerstone of your work--to increase perception. You use perception as a form of art, and to hopefully to increase it, or to make it more available, I should say, to your audience. What is your definition of a successful artist?

0:57:20 CCE — Well, the first definition of success to an artist, I think, should be the artist *vis à vis* themselves. And I think of success the way a flower grows; is it goes to the next stage. To say that you're successful because you've reached a specific stage such as, you know, a certain income. Well, you went to another stage but did you go to another stage within yourself--In terms of your own personal growth and expansion, or did you just become a more successful business person? Which is fine too; but if you want to stay as an artist or, as let's just say, as an authentic human being, then success is just very literally going to the next stage and then building from that to the next stage, to the next stage. And so, maybe like a flower, at some point you have a blossom, but certainly each time you go to the next stage there's a complete shift of point of view--which also changes the perspective on the past, and you can reevaluate what happened in different terms now that there's more perception.

And it's at that point that the universal frame of reference kicks in because you might see, as a result of your expanded perception, that you need to make a change and make a complete shift in your life, and so success in that context would be to make that change--regardless of what's involved; although, I mean, not in a ruthless way but just in a direct, unavoidable way.

0:59:14 JM -- Right. Even looking back over your earlier work you've done and evolving from there. In a sense too, that's the whole process of getting to see art, as a public person going to, or as a person in

public, going to see works of art we often start with things that we're familiar with as children; perhaps illustrations in books, or signs, or television or films, things around us. And as we mature then we too can begin to evolve our taste.

Perhaps that's also one of the benefits of art to a society is that it allows us access to evolve. You mentioned Indonesia and cultures with access to art, but within their culture for, example, they did not create Andy Warhol, they did not have a Rauschenberg, or a Carl Andre.

Their work is restricted to a more classic form, and so in a sense we've created more art forms because we have the demand for more layers, more levels, more potential. Do you agree with that or do you....?

1:00:27 CCE – I do agree with it because, you know, innovation is part of the culture so whatever art movement had a success at a given time there's always a thirst for something that'll fire new synapses; and so that did push the art scene, and especially in the 60s where it sometimes is just the shock factor that is the new thing. It's not necessarily more intellectually sophisticated than the previous movement, but it gets your attention.

And, you know, Warhol, coming out of advertising, he understood that very well; that you market yourself. Marketing draws attention to yourself just as much as the inherent significance of whatever it is you're drawing attention to; you're just not waiting to be noticed--you're making sure you're noticed...and...

1:01:27 JM -- In your case your work is allowing other people to enter the state of being that is the state of being of an artist; so in fact, you're making artists of your viewers.

1:01:40 CCE -- That would be nice; I'd like to think that. I mean, my approach is more low key, you know. I do things that require more time and they're more subtle because I know not everybody is interested in writing systems--although I wish that more text artists *would* be because, people write, and they use words and they color them, and they enlarge

them, and they, you know, do graffiti but they don't deal with the elements of text like: grammar or translation or writing systems.

Because once you get into text you have to introduce an intellectual component--that's just in the nature of the materials. And so I think text art is today, as I see it, is comparable to where painting and sculpture were during Impressionism. Text art has a potential to be a very distinct, mainstream movement, and one that picks up where conceptual art left off.

And so, it's true that anything can be art, but at the end, time is going to determine whether it's art worth preserving--that's not something that a contemporaneous society can do, and you know, it's after your lifetime. You don't know if anyone's can keep your art around.

1:03:09 JM – Right, right; it's like fashion, it comes and goes.

CCE – Exactly. So you may as well develop your perception for everything, not just for art because, as you say, art shifts around, and it shouldn't be the only thing worth developing perception for.

1:03:32 JM – And so... does that diminish the importance of art, do you think, because if it is like fashion and in the next century Picasso will be meaningless, no one will want it. Does that undervalue, undervalue the work, or is the work overvalued and it really is just a fashion play and we shouldn't take it so seriously, or is, in fact, something more serious going with art that transcends any object or any ideal or movement about art. Is there something underlying matters more, other than the object?

1:04:11 CCE – Yes. I did (sic) I think the art activity, the field of art – I like to think in terms of fields-- is very important because it's about creation and so it's back to back with religion, because religion is also about the fact of being created, and who created it, and what's your relationship, and what degree of control do you have over it. Art deals with the exact same issues, only it answers them; it says “I create, I have control, and I can continue to create”.

So the fact of creation is central to the human experience, (JM -- right.) And so art is not going to go away, if anything I think it's going to

increase how, and those objects of historical significance like Picasso, I think, as long as there are collectors and an art market their value will remain high. As a matter of fact the pool of available Impressionist is shrinking (JM – Right...) because they're so unique, they're... it's such a finite pool that people holding onto them.

I think it's an interesting question "how do you value art in the future when everybody *can* be an artist?"

1:05:30 JM -- Rght... right.

CCE --But it's a question that the market has to answer; it's not of significance to all but the most you know ambitious artists.

1:05:41 JM – It's interesting too, that because of the Internet, for example, you have a website, your website beautifully explains the script and lets me learn how to use it, right then and there. And so, in a sense, it was in the past, that an artist didn't have control over their audience and you could visit their studio, the gallery and the museum did—and/or if you happen to know the artist you could visit their studio, but otherwise they didn't have an audience. And so the Internet has suddenly given you access to your own audience; and so, in a sense, you are as liberated as artists have ever, ever, ever, been because once again the control, the power is in your hands.

There are artists, of course—famous ones—that have decided not to show with galleries or will show only limited, or will actually auction themselves, or show their own work, or sell only on the on the Internet. So there are whole new ways for artists to empower themselves now, as well, in terms of what they create but also how they show it.

1:06:40 CCE -- The website does give me a lot of freedom, and so I don't have to.... my only hope isn't to be in a gallery. Although, I've never done the work as a way of assuring that I *would* be in a gallery, or that I would make money with it because that activity--as a primary goal--detracts from the artwork or the art activity itself--which is something that has changed a lot since conceptual art.

I don't know that anybody who considers themselves a conceptual artist can tell you where they're going to go, or where they... I mean you can tell where you intend to go, but you can't tell where you're going to have to go, based on the integrity of the concepts that you're working with. So to have, for instance, a primary goal of making money with the art—you know, unless I'm actually going to print it--that's not something that I can guarantee even myself is something that I can afford to do--if it detracts from what my main art activity is.

I just do what I do, and I go where it takes me, and so far I feel I've been a great beneficiary because of the resultant ability to perceive things... from an artist's point of view. And I think that's, that perception is accessible to anyone, who, who's interested in developing it.

1:08:26 JM – Right. No, your art seems more to be about disseminating the state of mind, an artist's state of mind, to put that out and make that available, so that anyone can pick it up and go with that and view their world from a new perspective, with a new lens.

You had once said, I think, that art was a pillow that you can take the tag of and you can own it, it was yours.

1:08:57 CCE -- Exactly. I mean it probably doesn't come with a tag at all, it's just yours right from the git-go.

JM – Un, hun.. Yes, it's true because you don't get to keep all of your own art that, really, the process is the thing. I mean you want to make beautiful work of things that are important to you, but really it is the working process. I'm always amazed when artists can sell out a show and walk away and that's the end of it, they'll never see that work again. For me it would be, I think, very difficult to do. I would want to keep everything, so I wouldn't make it as an artist.

But yours is an interesting and very open ended idea in the sense that you give it away because it's what matters; the art is what matters so you give it away. So that's sort of an interesting twist on the idea of “it matters, so I don't give it away.”

1:09:54 CCE -- Right. For everyone of me there is somebody else seeing in a different way. I think that's what's wonderful, is that everybody can do it in their own way and we each are unique, and what we express is going to be unique if we let it be as authentic as possible.

JM – Right...right.

This was Art Matters with conceptual artist C.C. Elian. The interviewer was Julia Morton a freelance writer, art critic and curator with specialties in visual art and cultural creation. Sound editing by Studio 137. Art Matters was recorded at KSVR Studios. For more information go to ccelian.com. Art matters was made possible by a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Piano performance of Erik Satie's Gymnopedie No. 2 by George Peter Tingley.

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