

Santoro's Room

James Lord

To begin with: a room is not generally considered an open, unlimited space but an enclosed, -partitioned part of a building or house, especially a part used as a lodging. A lodging, of course, is primarily defined as a place in which to live, a place of refuge and sleep. One's room therefore is the locus of what in life is most essential and precious, and its contents are one's possession. The symbols of an occupant's life: his condition, his -occupation, his experiences, aspirations, past, present and perchance future, his hopes, fears, and dreams. To perceive so much in a mere room constitutes a serious challenge for anyone's perception, especially if the room's contents are not the daily attributes of the occupant's life but, rather, deliberate and specific creations intended to summon an imaginative, intellectual and psychic revelation of artistic purpose.

Vittorio Santoro's Room at the Yvon Lambert Gallery is one of these, created to make perceptible a mental concept, and therefore perforce to be considered and contemplated as an example of the art called "conceptual," a generic misnomer, because a concept is a distinctively stressed process of imagining and formulating a transcendent entity that is a realistic pattern of which existing things are imperfect representations. This, needless to say, compels an artist to confront a metaphysical dilemma that will inevitably lead him to draw a viewer into the realm of speculation and hypothesis. All art does this, of course, to a greater or lesser -degree. A sculpture, for example, by Michelangelo, seems hardly comparable to one by Giacometti and yet both are alike in a reality beyond the misleading simplicity of appearances, because both represent profound -attempts to express the inexpressible enigma of human phenomena. Masaccio and Matisse were searching—in vain—for the same thing. Like Giacometti and Michelangelo they came close to a goal, then for all their pains went unrewarded. Aesthetics are a hoax, beguiling as they may be, because there is no answer to that cosmic question.

Santoro's Room was not selected by him as a site for his creativity but offered by Yvon Lambert, a gallery -owner and well-known defender of the avant-garde. It came therefore less as a choice than as a convenience, so to speak, its walls, ceiling, floor, entrance, and one window already in place. Within these confines the -artist was entirely free—a limitation of means rather than their liberation!—to create a statement of his concept. It bears a title: *It's all in your mind/C'est tout dans ma tête*. This is to say that reality resides entirely in the awareness of a visitor to the Room even as it resides entirely in the awareness—the purpose?—of the Room's creator. This paradoxical affirmation prepares both the creator and the visitor to reach seemingly contradictory- conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises. As an artistic *raison d'être*, such a path toward appreciation leads through the labyrinth of difficult but sincerely appealing conjecture.

Approaching the threshold of the Room a visitor is momentarily arrested by a word, an adhesive foil in large letters on the floor: BEHIND. It gives one pause, for this word primarily refers to a situation in back of or behind an observer. Is it to be assumed therefore that what awaits one within the Room lies already beyond contemplation in the past? When considering this unlikely possibility, it becomes noticeable that one of the letters in the word is upside down, an instead of an N. This cannot be whimsy. The artist apparently means to imply that what is behind is not as it seems, that, indeed, the word serves to indicate something which lies between one thing and another, a bridge, perhaps, between contemplation and comprehension leading one to move into the Room. Hardly, however, after stepping across the threshold another word appears on the floor in identically large letters: BEFORE, though in this case the lettering is normal. Now, the words behind and before have approximately a similar connotation, suggesting what may be considered anticipatory. Or, on the other hand, they may be meant to juxtapose a sense of what has been with that of what is to come.

One cannot be sure, and this conundrum perplexes the visitor by way of introduction to the Room itself and its contents. Perplexity can be a stimulus to discovery.

Having entered the room, one becomes its occupant and naturally looks around to see what it contains only to find that it is empty. The floor, at least, is entirely vacant. A concept, of course, being materially abstract, does not need tangible furnishings. So the occupant's eye is first drawn to what most attracts attention: light. Toward the end of the left wall is located a large window housing half-closed Venetian blinds through which bright white light falls into the Room. Obviously one is meant to respond to this illumination mentally, even physically. Now both mythological wisdom and contemporary common sense maintain that from light evolves the origin of all life upon the earth, coming as it does from the miraculous effects of the sun. The light in the Room, however, is not daylight and even less sunlight, for though it has the brightness it has neither the warmth nor the color of sunshine. It is, in a word, artificial and intended to be, since one is confronted not by a simulacrum of reality but by the real presence of a work of art. Light on its own, whether natural or artificial, may obviously serve a symbolic purpose, and the search for one leads to the shadow pattern created by the half-closed—or half-open—Venetian blinds. This pattern falls at an angle upon the adjoining wall, and it is a pattern of evenly spaced bars of light, which, if viewed as abstractions have no interpretive significance, but, on the other hand, if viewed as literally representative, suggest the shadow of a barred window, preventing the occupant from leaving the Room and by barring any entrance from outside ensuring his solitude within, compelling him, if possible, to seek understanding of his presence. And because it is presented as a concept the Room itself must—if one is sufficiently discerning—provide that understanding, and in doing so provide as well the definition of its *raison d'être*.

So one's attention must consequently be directed to whatever other things are contained within the Room. And one promptly notices an object the size of a rather large but rather thin box, obviously metallic and painted white, suspended by a wire from the ceiling to a height approximately two and a half meters from the floor. This object turns slowly upon itself, almost but not quite scraping against the nearby wall, upon which nevertheless a visible gash suggests that one time it did actually scrape against that pristine surface. The significance of this object and the purpose of its slow turning upon itself would be entirely open to conjecture were it not for some writing on the surfaces between its outer sides, as if it were, in fact, the evocation of a large book. What is written is: "And the past? I remember it as one remembers a landscape, an unchanging landscape." This is a memorial to memory, its duration and its meaning. Indeed, one is additionally informed that the entire work is named *Plate (for Paul)*, dedicated to the memory of a deceased friend of the artist. This tells us as much—or more—than it is necessary to know about the purpose and character of the work in its entirety.

Attention is finally turned toward two framed collages (not altogether without evoking the work of Schwitters). They hang at right angles to each other and are the final illustrations, as it were, of the original concept. Both are composed of letters carefully cut from newspapers or magazines and irregularly—but very tastefully—pasted onto a white surface. Together they bear the title of the entire work. The first reads, "It's all in your mind." The second, "C'est tout dans ma tête." And it is suggested that this very artistic means of communication is nevertheless reminiscent of messages sometimes employed by criminals such as kid-nappers to communicate their demands.

So we are definitely confronted by a direct challenge to understanding. Why, in the first place, are two languages presented in order to introduce the artistic concept? Why, moreover, is criminal anonymity evoked? This double—or triple—ambiguity says something significant about a creative mentality, for it suggests both provocation and uncertainty, meaning and unmeaning, the impossibility of decisive communication. Thus, one is left alone to confront the unknown, and, that, to be sure, is the lot of every human being. Memory, solitude, melancholy all come together in Santoro's Room. Tangible objects, visual impressions, even mental exertions are ultimately incapable of conveying what is by definition incommunicable. The artist has deliberately—or inadvertently?—revealed to us his emotions and thoughts. But are we able to attain understanding?

Understanding is the absolute mystery of existence, and yet it is the goal toward which all thought strives... in vain. Santoro's Room is an illustration of perplexity leading to perplexity leading to perplexity, leading and leading and leading to the final perplexity. And that, after all, is what endows human life with profound and wonderful purpose. A work of art able to suggest so much has touched the redeeming virtue of all experience. It has a life of its own, to be contemplated with amazement and more—with delight.

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James Lord is an author and art critic, first came to France as a member of the U.S. Army during the Second World War. Since then he has spent the major part of his life in Paris, where he was acquainted with many of the leading personalities in the modern European art world, including Picasso, Dora Maar, Balthus, and Giacometti. Considered one of the authorities on the latter's work and life, Lord published the now classic *A Giacometti Portrait* in 1965, followed by the the highly acclaimed *Giacometti: A Biography* in 1985. Other publications include *Picasso and Dora* (1993), *Six Exceptional Women* (1994), *Some Remarkable Men* (1996) and *A Gift for Admiration* (1998). He is currently writing his wartime memoirs. He lives in Paris.