

POETRY/ART/LIFE

Above a fireplace in William Morris' Red House we read the inscription: ARS LONGA VITA BREVIS (art is long; life is short).

A decade or so after Morris' death, the Avant-Gardes of the early nineteenth century were the first to attack the boundary between life and art. From then on art would no longer just be something simply to **look** at. Today, in an increasingly aestheticised world swamped with advertising and marketing, where art is everything and everyone is an artist, we could say that life is short, but art is even shorter!

Morris knew change was coming. The Red House was his escape plan - the (expensive) fantasy that crumbled only too quickly when he realised that living both in the past and the present at the same time was financially and emotionally too exhausting to upkeep.

The ever-changing, un-authored nature of the house was the key to its power ; the endless stream of visitors, each contributing to the house in some way, led painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti to describe the place as *more poem than house*. I would argue instead that, in all its chaotic, unfinished glory, the Red House can really be POETRY in the (more powerful) metaphorical sense. Visiting this place is an experience that truly exceeds the limits of our language (any tour guide can tell you there is always more to learn). It is forever in a state of *becoming* - becoming something that did not exist before.

We are not just viewing William Morris' art in this place, but, inextricably bound to it, the **lives** of all who stayed, lived and worked here; the sadness and debauchery, the physical and psychological maturing of a group of young adults struggling to experience meaningfulness in an increasingly industrialised world.

We learn (as did Rossetti) that POETRY is not good, beautiful or complete. It is messy, gritty and *real*. In a world full of *stuff*, *images* and art, art, *art* I am less inclined to add to the festering pile of desirables that society requires of me as an 'artist'. Art is for me the possibility of thinking what cannot be thought, of seeing what cannot be seen, of going beyond the limits that define my world. Let's call this POETRY/ART and think of it as an extension of the POETRY we find at the Red House.

In order to experience POETRY you have to first be willing to open up, to let **things** both *speak* and be *silent* (the strata of visual and verbal information build up over the time you spend here). POETRY/ART is the same process, but it seems there are more barriers to break down.

I had a conversation with a visitor today that went something like this:

V: So what do you do... (*looks at pile of books on table*) ...a lot of reading?

I: Right now I'm writing...

V: Do you make *modern* art? (smiling)

I: Do you mean contemporary art?... What do you mean by that?

V: Produce stuff that no one understands.

I: Produce stuff that no one *wants* to understand.

After which we had a long and amicable chat about craft vs. art, social housing, broken marriages and the children of the next generation.

Please don't be angry at POETRY/ART!

POETRY/ART demands nothing of you, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' interpretations, in fact - there is no need to worry about it at all if you don't want to! But think about this, how old were you when that blue smiley face was painted in the dark corner of the ceiling here? minus forty years, minus sixty years, minus one hundred and sixty years?

That painting says something more powerful than the rest of the whole ceiling - it says

NOW

I am painting this ceiling and I am feeling good 'cos I've had a few ciders and I'm going to secretly paint this happy face ... This will stay here for a while and I might not be, this face is my present in the future, and I want to be smiling like an idiot! :-)

The artist Robert Smithson (1938-1973) has said that artists are not seeking the truth, but the fictions that reality will become.

POETRY/ART **work** is a kind of anti-work. There is no specific task to perform, no nine-to-five schedule, no rules or limitations except those which you set yourself. When I am **working** it is not for the benefit of others (sorry) but the only way that I know how to live; a process of building, thinking, dwelling and being that feels natural to me. I have made a choice (as can anyone). By saying *I am an artist* I am giving my life to POETRY/ART; to the constant re-invention of myself through the work that I do, however morose, pathetic or ridiculous it may seem to anyone else. Let's call this POETRY/ART/LIFE.

As the Red House has become a part of my POETRY/ART/LIFE, so have I, an *artist in residence here*, become a part of the POETRY/ART/LIFE of this place. It is the **NOW** (the life) of this house that makes it such a poignant thing (to speak and be silent with). For although we may not all consider ourselves artists, we all know what it is to be alive.