

A young physician and philosopher has as one of his guiding interests a question regarding the mind. What odd transformation is it within organic matter that gives rise to conscious reasoning? He has attended Cheselden's dissections and been struck by the solid-looking, yellowy, cerebral matter his teacher presents so confidently as the origin of human thought. At the same time his motivation is derived from more intimate experiences. His exchanges with his theologian and philosopher friends, not least on these very topics, give him a compelling picture of the mind as an expansive realm unbounded by the limits of brain or skull. And the paradox has not escaped his notice that, while the brain can clearly be said to belong to the individual, the thought derived from its functioning gains its singularity on each occasion from the exchange and the particular contributions made by all those involved.

The theme of human consciousness is one he returns to frequently, but it strikes him with peculiar urgency when, against his usual preferences, he finds himself present at a public execution. For the condemned man the workings of the mind cease precisely as the blade separates head from body: such is the widely-held view. The physician for his own part is not so sure. Common assumptions of this kind should be tested. If the prisoner's reasoning mind were to be found still operating after decapitation, if it were so even momentarily, that fact would have important implications. And it would do the young physician's standing no harm if he could be the one to make the discovery.

So he sets about planning an experiment. First of all he will need the help of someone whose death is scheduled. To that end he notifies the prison authorities that in due course he will visit to interview a number of the condemned. His choice will have to be made carefully. It is an unusual participation being sought, one likely to be beyond the abilities of most people. But his ambition for the furthering of knowledge inspires optimism that such a person can be found.

There are some other difficulties to overcome. If a head severed from the body retains powers of consciousness, still the mechanisms for communication may be disabled; even if the brain within the head is able to muster reason it may have lost its capacity to direct movements of jaw and lips. A simple code will be needed to provide insurance—a blink of the eye, for instance, or to rule out chance perhaps a sequence of blinks. In the moments before the fall of the blade the accomplice will prepare as best he can. Immediately after the execution the physician will place himself as he would in any exchange so as to facilitate eye contact and will ask loudly and boldly: *Have you presence of mind?* If the man now executed finds himself still able to think he will be primed to respond in whatever way he can, with words, with a movement of his own lips or with the agreed signal of eye-blinks.

The physician is fortunate and finds a prisoner who meets his requirements, a man sufficiently accepting of his fate and at ease with the events of his life that he is able to show a genuine interest in the experiment. The day of the execution arrives. The sun is shining. A crowd gathers. On the executioner's platform, an unusual number of men are witnessed, the physician has invited his colleagues, has judged it wise to involve his more skeptical acquaintances as well as those open to his hypothesis. Things are arranged so that no obscurity should spoil the observation. No shadow should fall to hide the view of gestures that might be of the most subtle kind. The physician has become increasingly impressed with his condemned helper, whose composure he can see is evidence of an unusual intelligence. In fact, he has warmed to the man so much that he regrets the objectivity of his own manner, which he would have been inclined to emphasise in other circumstances for reasons of his profession. In due course the moment comes. The prisoner is given his chance to say a few words. The last rights are carried out. The physician takes one final opportunity to go through the procedures they have agreed. Then the man is put under the blade, the blade is brought down and, to the cheers of the crowd, his head is severed and lands with a thump in the basket.

History has recorded the results of the experiment as negative. Neither the physician nor his colleagues could discern any response on the face of the executed man. The seconds ticked away. And when all witnesses agreed, the experiment was declared to be at an end.

These details are given in an account written in the physician's own hand, preserved in an archive that remains accessible even today to anyone willing to make the necessary arrangements. One researcher has consulted the record in order to relay the story through her contribution to a radio programme on the history of Capital Punishment—it is her account that forms the basis for this current retelling. As she speaks to the interviewer she is aware of a risk that she may deviate from the hard facts. The line can be difficult to find between fidelity to the archival document and the embellishment of a story. But perhaps some license is admitted. After all, the academy itself accords priority these days to the popularising of scholarly work. To dramatise the events of history is one good way of giving them currency and that in turn may be an effective way of drawing new recruits into the field of study—if not into historical scholarship then some other discipline.

Now a new version of events might be told. If in some respects it does not depart markedly from the earlier versions, then it presents a different order of speculation. With scientific progress of the kind achieved over many hundreds of years, researchers of the far future are able to return to what took place in 18th Century England, to find data that have remained hidden. The new facts are gathered using methods similar to those employed by astrophysicists of our own era, who can demonstrate evidence of planets many light-years away, recording their barely-discernible effects on a nearby star, or who can calculate the percentage of gas in an extra-terrestrial atmosphere using advanced forms of spectrometry. In this new version the physician's account of negative results turns out to have been a mistake. In fact, his early intuition was correct. The executed man's reasoning mind did not switch off at the moment of decapitation but, over the course of a few seconds—well within the time of the experiment—faded out in a way that allowed him for just a moment to be conscious of his predicament.

The new version puts it like this. The executed man sees the physician draw close. He hears sounds associated with the movements of the physician's lips. He understands that he is being spoken to, recalls the part he is being asked to play in the experiment and that his response is sought. But in the peculiar intensity of that moment he makes a different choice. He opts to return a blank expression. With the little measure of control he still retains over the muscles of his face, he allows his features to hang slack. At the same time the expression is produced in such a way that it cannot be read easily as a mind divested of its powers of thought.

It is true that the executed man himself hardly has time to realise what he is doing and no time at all to develop the rationale for his actions. That said, he reveals a certain skillfulness. What, precisely, is his achievement? Is the executed prisoner turning the tables? Is he establishing himself now as the questioner, the physician as his addressee? If so, what might be his question? With the reversal of roles is the executed man appropriating the physician's words too? Is the interrogation he builds so subtly into the blank expression the very one the physician himself has just asked, only with its emphasis altered: "Have you the necessary presence of mind to understand what's taking place here?". Or is it a question of a more rhetorical kind still, one that will lead the physician into melancholy in his later years as he realises his executed accomplice was right and that all ambition is folly?

To pursue these lines of thought further would be a mistake. If the physician finds himself coming back again and again to the face of his executed accomplice it is precisely because the blank expression does not denote—neither questions nor words of any determinable kind.

When the physician goes on to write the report of his experiment, he does so in the way he thinks required of him, to respect the principles of his discipline. All the while, his thoughts remain exercised. Insofar as the irresolution of the experiment is a result of actions carried out by the dying prisoner, the exchange between these two men continues. It does so for as long as the physician is compelled by his memories. In a sense, the exchange continues beyond the demise of the physician too, doing so through the retelling of events. And if the oddly stalled exchange between these two historical characters persists beyond the limits of their own lives, we might propose the reason it can do so is that something of the exchange existed before them. Let's say it predates the lives of all storytelling agents and extends far beyond those lives too, thus revealing a force that shapes the evolution and development of organic bodies understood wrongly, too often, as origins from which conscious minds are derived.

Rumour has it that the mysterious monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* is derived from the work of Jan Check, West Coast American Artist, who has died at the age of 76. Whether or not it's true, an equation on some level is difficult to avoid. Both Kubrick's monolith and the sculptural work for which Check is best known share the same simple geometry. Check's own remarks over the years have fuelled speculation. He once told an interviewer that his belief in extra-terrestrial life led him to "do the kind of work that could have been brought here by a U.F.O." More recently, anecdotes have emerged suggesting his words are more apposite than they may first appear. There does, indeed, seem to be something like an outlandish form of life evident in the artist's work. And this fact has implications extending beyond the consideration of his work alone.

In a documentary celebrating the artist's career, an account is given by one of Jan Check's technicians about an incident that took place when they were designing a process for casting blocks of solid resin. The artist was presented with two options, both of which would provide the qualities he sought. It was Check's intuition, however, to realise that one of these open up an unexpected potential in the work. If none of those present were able to articulate it at the time, a memory of that particular moment in the process and its significance has remained with the technician, allowing him to relay the story and so draw attention to aspects of the work that may not have been realised otherwise.

Over the years, Check's sculptures have tended to be spoken about as a problematic of surfaces. Perhaps too often, discussion has been arrested at the level of the work's high finish. If that is a failure of the commentary, it could be due in part also to a certain kind of trap set by the artist, or by the work. The sculptural volume and its importance, which have been obscured, as it were, behind a glossy exterior, comes into focus only later. That delay has an intensifying effect. In any event, what the technician's story presents is an image of the artist compelled, peering into the depths of his materials and puzzling over something unexpected he finds there.

Here again, *2001* seems to be evoked. Kubrick's astronaut, on encountering the monolith orbiting Jupiter, exclaims: "My God, it's full of stars!". Check's response to what he was witnessing in the volume of his prototype might not have been quite that, but the technician's account suggests surprise of a similar order.

If Jan Check devoted a special attention to the way his sculptures operated through their physical volume he would not be so different from any sculptor in that respect. One peculiarity in this case is the way the work intervenes in a familiar discussion about the 'presence' of an artwork. The minimalists, with whom Check enjoyed an ambivalent association, had made a forceful and very public argument against formalist values of presence or 'presentness' as the highest aspiration of the work of modern art. Famously, Donald Judd proposed in response that a work need only be interesting. Likewise, as a challenge to what Judd saw as an inevitable and unquestioned anthropomorphism in the work of his detractors, he instead aimed to make pieces that appeared to be empty volumes.

These positions taken by the younger generation of artists do not necessarily free minimalism in an absolute way from formalist values. The 'interest' that a viewer experiences when encountering one of Judd's works is on some level an enlivening of the encounter. And that enlivening may not be so different from the kind guaranteeing 'presence'. In commentary today, art continues to be affirmed for its vitality; much less frequently to we read or hear any thoughtful consideration of what it might mean to affirm a value of vitality in the first place, or what the precise nature of that vitality might be.

Check is best known and most often cited for the simple, 3-Dimensional shapes he made with surfaces polished to perfection. In contrast to some of his East Coast contemporaries he had no axe to grind about a fundamental Conceptualism. Check was happy to devote himself to the hours of labour required in finishing his pieces. Given the highly specific problem posed by his process he did, however, choose to consult specialists. Check understood well that the best way of getting results was to build close relationships with his technical staff, friendships that would allow the engagement with the problem to extend beyond the usual limits of a professional transaction. He hedged his bets as well, though, commissioning a number of companies to prototype his work. In the nature of things—as the artist had no doubt anticipated—it was not long before the employees of these different companies, who knew each other already due to the specialism of their field, were in conversation, ramping up the competition on their client's behalf.

The problems involved in casting blocks of solid resin were well-known. Polyester is catalysed by exothermic reaction, generating heat within the material that increases exponentially with the volume—the more resin being used, the hotter it gets. Unintended results include discolouration, deformation or, in the extreme case, combustion. The usual way of preventing these technical malfunctions is by cooling the materials in advance. To slow the curing process also allows for a more thorough mixing of the resin and catalyst, which minimises inconsistencies appearing otherwise as a swirling pattern within the transparent block and spoiling its optical purity.

The pre-cooling of the material comes with some less fortunate effects too. As the time is extended during which the resin is sitting in its liquid state the likelihood increases that the material will be contaminated. The risk of dust impurities can be dealt with by scrupulous cleaning of the workspace. A more formidable challenge is presented by air bubbles. While the slowing of the process does help prevent the influx of bubbles into the resin, even the most careful mixing causes some turbulence.

One team working on the question of how to deal with air bubble impurities came up with a novel solution. Processing the liquid resin in a vacuum chamber had the effect of expanding the bubbles, decreasing their density and allowing them to escape the viscous fluid more easily. When the technicians experimented they found that a volume of resin appearing first to have only a few tiny bubble-impurities was transformed into a boiling mass of gasses and liquid. It was hard to imagine how this excitation would not increase the folding of air back into the resin, but when the vacuum seal was released and the chamber returned to normal pressure a remarkable stillness settled there. Through the chamber's viewing window the strong impression was had of a material now imbued with an exceptional density and rendered oddly placid. It was this phenomenon that came as a surprise to Jan Check and that gave him pause for thought.

Meanwhile, some miles away in another suburb of Los Angeles, a different team of fabricators were experimenting with an alternative solution. They too had found that air bubbles in the resin were the biggest difficulty. But rather than attempting to rid the material of these impurities this team had surmised that if the bubbles could be reduced in their volume then they might be rendered invisible. Shrinking the volume of the bubbles in a liquid can be done by subjecting that liquid to the weight of extra atmospheres—which is to say by processing the not-yet-set resin in a compression chamber.

As Check's technician recounts, in the final analysis both of these methods were equally effective. In the end, the artist preferred the vacuum chamber method and the technician exposes an interesting reason why that should have been so. When the liquid resin settled at normal atmospheric pressure, the placid and tensionless quality with which it was now imbued appeared striking. Check had commented. The volume seemed to distinguish itself from other ordinary things around it in the room. This quality was all the more intriguing, he remarked, because of the frequency with which a sculpture's success tended to be discussed in terms of tension—either tension between individual works or between a work and its exhibition setting.

Why, it might be asked, does a material rendered dense and divested of its tensions not appear deadened as a result? What is its compelling quality? The odd liveliness of the material that caused Check on that occasion to stare with fascination into its volume seems to demand a different way of thinking, which could be put as follows. One form of vitality is understood on the basis of well-functioning bodies, properly operating artworks of the kind that are anticipated and then authored. Another form of vitality is revealed only in the incomplete, the unresolved, the unintended, where that word means precisely no tendency, no internal tension.

If these ideas are made possible by the intervention of a peripheral player, a mere technician, perhaps it is no coincidence. What's true on the level of the work is true also of the broader field, the ecology of which demands a certain disarming of authorities and of competencies.