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Constantforce: Remembering Denis Dutton (1944-2010)

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Constantforce: Remembering Denis Dutton (1944-2010)

“Denis, I would like you to meet someone who actually likes your work.” This is how the aesthetician David Novitz introduced me to Denis Dutton, while we were having a tea break on the first morning of the historic Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics, held at the University of Sydney in June 1997.*

Shortly before, I had told David that Denis’s anticipated presence at the conference had been for me, a European postdoc eager to explore global approaches to art and aesthetics, one of the many features that had made the prospect of participating in the Sydney conference such a thrilling affair. David, a colleague, friend, and intellectual opponent of Denis at the

University of Canterbury in Christ Church, New Zealand, informed me about the many enemies Denis had made in academia after he had started organizing the Bad Writing Contest in 1995. This now well-known charge against obscurantist prose in the humanities had escaped my attention, but seemed like a welcome initiative that was fully in line with its originator's views on scholarship.

I knew Denis's work mainly through his 'Bookmarks' in the journal *Philosophy and Literature* that he edited. I had discovered these vivid and at times hilariously debunking reviews after reading Denis's essay 'Mythologies of Tribal Art,' published in the journal *African Arts* in 1994. As in many of his 'Bookmarks,' in this essay he battled against the more cantankerous variants of the postmodern turn that were making themselves increasingly felt in the anthropology of art. He exposed the ideological biases, jargonised rhetoric, wilful misreadings and lack of empirical foundation of a series of philippics in which self-righteous scholars, usually from outside the field, had started accusing previous writers on 'tribal art' of sinning against everything that contemporary political correctness held dear. Being well acquainted with the anthropology of art, I was all too aware of the belligerent and embarrassingly uninformed character of many of these at times vicious attacks. I had also struggled through several essays from the same postmodern/poststructural mould promising new directions informed by 'critical theory.' But the increasingly predictable and one-sided perspectives of these essays had failed to enthuse me, while their often-pompous prose, expressing fashionable phraseology in convoluted sentences, had made me doubt my command of English. I therefore much enjoyed the sharp-minded and down-to-earth rebuttals of a courageous and lone scholar who showed that more often than not the emperor had no clothes.

Although this may come as a surprise to people who, like myself at the time, knew Denis only through his fierce criticism of what he considered trendy posturing, sloppy

thinking and mystifying gobbledegook, in person he was a most kind and generous man. This already became clear to me when later that day I enquired whether he had had the opportunity to browse through my book *Beauty in Context: Towards an Anthropological Approach to Aesthetics*. Based on my Ph.D dissertation, this work had been published a few months before, and I had made sure that the editor of *Philosophy and Literature* received a review copy. At the time of the Sydney conference, and inspired by the work of Ellen Dissanayake, whose book *Homo Aestheticus* he had praised highly in his journal, Denis was already on the road to an evolutionary approach to art and aesthetics. My book's title must have given him the impression, not unreasonably, that it was all about cultural relativism in aesthetics and hence presented a culturalist rather than a naturalist point of view. In an amicable, non-polemic way he replied: "You know, I've somewhat lost interest in the idea of beauty being socially constructed. I'm more interested in aesthetic universals these days." To which I replied: "My book is about both!" Some time later I got the impression that the long chapter on 'Universalism in Aesthetics,' for example, had indeed not escaped Denis's attention; when I asked him about the results of his research on the aesthetic standards of Sepik sculptors in New Guinea, he replied: "Nothing that you don't already know." In light of Denis's comments on Sepik aesthetics in *The Art Instinct* (2009), I take this to refer to such universally applied criteria as symmetry, balance, clarity, vitality, and moderate innovation, as empirically documented in the said chapter.

On Friday, the second day of the conference, and having heard my talk on 'words for art in non-Western cultures,' on which he had commented favourably, Denis asked me when I was to fly back to Europe. "Monday? Listen, I've rented a car and plan to visit all the galleries of tribal art here in Sydney over the weekend. Why don't you join me?" In the two intense and highly pleasurable days that followed, we visited more public and private galleries than I can now remember, looking at Melanesian art especially. The list included at least two private

galleries that were in effect closed but were willing to open their doors, one on late Saturday afternoon, the other on Sunday morning, after Denis had made a few phone calls. I then learned that Denis was an avid collector of Melanesian art, and that he cherished his collection of decorated shields of the New Guinea Highlands particularly.

During that weekend in Sydney, I also became aware of Denis's seemingly inexhaustible energy. After he had dropped me off at my hotel that Saturday night around 1 AM after a very full day (together with a few other conference participants, we had also been to the Sydney Opera House to attend a performance of Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* and afterwards had a drink at co-organizer Catherine Runcie's house), he said: "Pick you up tomorrow at seven?" "Please Denis, make that nine!" Even so, we caught the owners of a private gallery still having breakfast in their morning gowns when we knocked at their door for Sunday's first visit.

'Constantforce' was the alias Denis used for his private email address. In the years to follow, I became convinced of the appropriateness of that alias. For example, like so many other colleagues and friends, I kept wondering about the speed with which he replied to emails, often within minutes, whatever the time in New Zealand or at any other place he might be staying. It seemed the man never slept. Asked where he found the time for his many activities, in 2009 he told an interviewer of *The Press*, a New Zealand newspaper: "There are 24 hours in the day. It seems like a lot to me."

When I met up with Denis again at a New Orleans conference in 1998 (in fact, he had made sure I received an invitation to join a panel on African art and philosophy there), he was in the midst of setting up *Art and Letters Daily*, talking to lawyers on the phone and expressing his amazement about the amounts of money they charged for even a brief call for advice. But his efforts, as we all know now, paid off immensely.

ALD was already big when in the early summer of 2005, during a European holiday, Denis and his wife Margit spent a few days in the Low Countries, where I live. But work continued, and I remember my brother Walter helping Denis out via email on Internet connections while he was making his daily uploads to *ALD* from various hotels. In between, we visited the ethnographic museums of Antwerp and Leiden, examining Melanesian art and talking to curators. I recall Denis's delight when in the reserves of the Antwerp museum he spotted what seemed to be an unknown work by the Suau (Massim/Trobriand culture area) sculptor Mutuaga, active around 1900, and whose individual style the scholar Harry Beran had identified. Denis took a photo of the piece, intending to forward the image to his Australian colleague.

Although we stayed in touch throughout the years, exchanging publications and notes on interesting new books and other scholarly events, it so happened that in 2010 contact intensified. In 2009 I had written an essay on the work of the German scholar Ernst Grosse, who suggested already at the end of the nineteenth century that we approach art and aesthetics from an intercultural and interdisciplinary perspective, even hinting at the possibility of a Darwinian aesthetics. Given both the essay's topic and what I then considered to be its relatively straightforward and lively character, I thought it might be suitable for *Philosophy and Literature*, a journal soliciting stimulating contributions "written in clear, jargon-free prose." I submitted the essay via the journal's email address, but it of course ended up on Denis's desk. Nice piece, he replied, but "way too academic." I was then given an editorial tutorial in true Dutton style ("Yes, I'm having fun at your expense"). In my reply, I could not help demurring here and there, and Denis actually enjoyed the riposte. Yet there was something irresistibly liberating in his ultimate advice: "write like it's for *The New Yorker*." So I cut the essay by a third, removing in the process as many adjectives and adverbs as possible, leaving out original German phrases, and deleting half the footnotes. When I

resubmitted the pruned essay, Denis loved it: “it is so direct and clear it hardly needs a single tiny editorial improvement, even from my itchy pen!” A proud day when one passes the editorial test of tests!

The essay appeared in what turned out to be the last issue of *Philosophy and Literature* that Denis edited. In early October 2010, with the issue just published, he wrote telling me how pleased he was “to finally have you in our pages,” and reminding me of “the joys of writing for the *New Yorker*, rather than (ugh!) the *Review of Metaphysics*. Frees you up. The hell with academic sludge.” That was the good news. “The bad news is that I have cancer and am going to make the next issue (April) my last. Don’t even know if my name will be on it.” I was told not to worry. “I’m responding to treatment, which a lot of people don’t, and will be around for a while. But I knew I needed to give up the journal. Thirty five years is a long time to edit a journal.” Responding to my reply, Denis observed: “It is interesting as a philosopher to be in this position. One is reminded daily of Socrates saying that philosophy was training in how to die. True, I feel. I stress, quite without effort, how lucky I’ve been. Super lucky! And read Darwin, who puts it all in a proper perspective.”

Denis Dutton, one of nature’s more lovable temporary forces, died on 28 December 2010.

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* Organized by, among others, the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics, publishers of this journal, this was the first conference ever to consider the reflections on the arts and their qualities as formulated in principle in all cultures across space and time. It may also well have

been the first conference in philosophy the proceedings of which, edited by Rick Benitez, were published in electronic form and made available on-line for free.