

by
John
Berger

Romaine Lorquet



Romaine Lorquet was born in Lyons about fifty years ago. Soon after the war she was in Paris, where she knew Brancusi, Giacometti and Etienne-Martin, each of whom recognised and encouraged her as an artist. More than twenty years ago she left Paris to live and work in relative isolation in the country.

There she has made many carvings. I use the word carvings instead of sculptures because the first word fits a little less easily into the contemporary art world. Scarcely ever has she tried to place her work in any kind of contemporary artistic or cultural context. There is nothing, I think, evasive in this decision. She has simply chosen to remain outside.

And it is outside — in both a general and precise sense — that I have seen most of her carvings. They are on a hillside around a peasant's house, in which she lives; some lie on the earth beneath the trees, others are nearly lost in the undergrowth. A few are made of wood, most are made of stone. Their height varies between 30 and 90 centimetres. Sometimes grasses or roots have grown through them. They are not on display.

Most man-made objects refer back to the event of their own making. Their presence depends upon the use of the past tense. *This house was built of stone.* These carvings hardly refer back at all to their own making. They look neither finished nor unfinished. Like a tree or a river, they appear to exist in a continuous present. Their apparent lack of history makes them look inevitable.

Speculatively I have tried to imagine them in a different context. In a museum gallery, or a city street, or an apartment. Because they insist so little upon their own making, they would then look like something found in



nature. If they were thought of as being hand-made, they would seem to belong to another period, in either the remote past or future.

Even on the earth, under the fruit trees, they challenge the demarcation line to which we are accustomed between nature and art. They deceive us into thinking that they are on the far side of that frontier. Perhaps they occupy the area

which art left empty when it relinquished its magical function over nature. Some of the carvings are fully carved only on three sides: on the fourth, the stone has been left blank. This could suggest that in the carver's mind they were to be placed against a wall. Yet I doubt it. I think it far more likely that the fourth side was left uncarved so that the carving could remain "attached" to the nature from which it was only half-emerging.

Each of these carvings brings something forward towards the viewer. Yet they do not represent specific forms. They are not portraits of anything. Nor are they abstractions. The carver has not dug for forms in nature and cleaned and purified them in order to set them up as symbols. Lorquet's work has nothing in common with Classical decoration or with the modern sculptures of Arp, Miro, Max Bill, or Henry Moore.

What do these carvings bring forward?

Within nature, space is not something accorded from the outside; it is a condition of existence born from within. It is what has been, or will be, *grown into*. Space in nature is what the seed contains. Symmetry is the spatial law of growth, the law of *spacing*. Again, its code is not imposed from the outside but works from within. What the carvings bring forward from nature is such space and symmetry. Their forms obey the same laws of assembly as the fruit or leaves on a tree. They are assembled in such a way that they promise continuity — not the continuity of a logical series, but of growth.

Each carving is a "chain" of unions, of meetings, of events, "giving to" to and "receiving" each other so that their sum total is a single event. This much is of course true of any successful sculpture. One could say the same of Michelangelo's *Moses*. But with these carvings the single event they add up to, extends beyond themselves to include

the whole landscape from grass below to mountains in the distance.

On those mountains are countless uncarved rocks and stones. I have studied some of them to see whether, by concentrating my attention on them, I can make them work in the same way as the carved ones. They remain inert, fixed in themselves. Far from their bringing anything forward, they withdraw deeper and deeper into the remote finished state of their own being. Their existence answers only its own question.

By contrast, the carvings invoke unity. They have something in common with Sumerian sculpture. In that very early art, the assemblage of parts also resembled the clustering of tangible forms in nature: berries, cones, fruit, organs of the body, animal or human, flowers, roots. Metaphor was still embedded in the physical unity of the world. For example, a mouth in a face was the variant of a hole in the earth, or a leaf was the variant of a hand. Metamorphosis was considered a constant possibility, and sculpture was a celebration of the common material from which everything was made.

As the division of labour increased, art, like every other discipline, began to differentiate more and more sharply. Idealisation was one of its forms of differentiation. Sculptors competed with one another to carve the perfect mouth, the mouth which was perfectly and only itself. The more they succeeded, the greater the distinction became between the mouth and hole in the earth. Everything was divided into its type. Every distinction and distance became measurable. And empty space was born. For four centuries the drama of most European sculpture has been created out of defiance in face of this empty space. Yet for these carvings there is no such thing as empty space. There is only space *within* a system, including the space which surrounds them. Francois

Jacob.

"The power of assembling, of producing increasingly complex structures, even of reproducing, belongs to the elements that constitute matter. From particles to man, there is a whole series of integrations, of levels, of discontinuities. But there is no breach either in the composition of objects or in the reactions that take place in them; no change in 'essence'."

The experience which informs these carvings is also the experience of our own bodies. They work like a mirror. Not a mirror which denies the interior by reflecting the surface, but the mirror of another's eyes. In their reflection of us, we find not an image of ourselves, but recognition of our physical being. Exceptionally, in moments of revelation, one can have a similar experience of being recognised in front of a tree, a corn field, a river. The carvings bring a little forward from nature the potential of this experience. Yet they can bring it so far and no further. They combine confidence with extreme restraint. Why must they be so reticent? Or, to ask the same question another way, why are they half abandoned on a hillside?

All art, which is based on a close observation of nature, eventually changes the way nature is seen. Either it confirms more strongly an already established way of seeing nature or it proposes a new way. Until recently a whole cultural process was involved; the artist observed nature: his work had a place in the culture of his time and that culture mediated between man and nature. In post-industrial societies this no longer happens. Their culture runs parallel to nature and is completely insulated from it. Anything which enters that culture has to sever its connections with nature. Even natural sights (views) have been reduced in consumption to commodities.

The sense of continuity once supplied by nature is now supplied by the means of communication and exchange — publicity, TV, newspapers, records, radio, shop-windows, auto-routes, package holidays, currencies, etc. These, barring catastrophes — either personal or global — form a mindless stream in which any material can be transmitted and made homogeneous — including art.

The rejection implicit in these carvings of the present *institution of art*, is therefore functional not cultural. The distinction is important. The cultural rejection of art — the anti-art movement, cultivated primitivism like Dubuffet's, auto-destructive art, etc. — are dependent on the art they reject and so lead back into the museum and the institution of art. Duchamp was not an iconoclast: he was a new type of curator.

The rejection of the carvings is functional because the culture within which they would have to operate is incapable of mediating between society and nature. And so they are forced to attempt to do this themselves. They begin from a very close observation of nature; and then, single-handed, they try to refer these observations, these insights, back to nature. Previously the referring-back would have been a gradual, indirect and socially mediated process. Here it becomes immediate, simple and physical, because the carvings have scarcely broken from nature. They refuse the *distinction* of art in our time.

Sometimes the vision of an individual imagination can outstrip the social forms of the existing culture — including the social form of art. When this happens the works produced by that imagination exist, not only in a personal but also in an historical solitude.

A butterfly alights on one of the carvings, closes its wings, becomes like the infinitely thin blade of an axe buried in the stone, opens and shuts its wings, flies off.

There is a paragraph by Marx which exists in the same solitude.

"The *human* essence of nature first exists only for *social* man; for only here does nature exist as the *foundation* of his own *human* existence. Only here has what is to him his *natural* existence become his *human* existence, and nature become man for him. Thus *society* is the unity of being of man with nature — the true resurrection of nature — the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfillment." (Karl Marx: *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts*)