



Interview with Derek Allan on 'Andre Malraux and Aesthetics.'

INTERVIEW: DEREK ALLAN By Rick Visser, June 22 - 29, 2003

The site [http:// www.artrift.blog-city.com](http://www.artrift.blog-city.com) a publie cet interview en juin et juillet 2003

I first became interested in the writing of **Derek Allan** when I discovered his paper, '*André Malraux and the Challenge to Aesthetics*' while doing an exploratory expedition on the web. I found the paper keenly provocative and well worth a closer reading. As an artist, much of what I am interested in questions what is forgotten or marginalized both in our culture and in the art world itself. Often the latest trends and issues can be enriched and oriented by reanimating marginalized works or persons or texts from the past. In that light, I must thank Derek Allan for revitalizing my interest in **Malraux** and, particularly, his book, *The Voices of Silence*. This rather stately book, when published in 1951, was hailed by **Edmund Wilson** as 'perhaps one of the really great books of our time.' Nonetheless, like many other such works, it is now all but forgotten. It is ranked somewhat lower than 142,000 on the Amazon.com sales ranking.

Derek Allan is based at the **Australian National University in Canberra**, Australia. He has a longstanding interest in **André Malraux** and has

published a number of articles about his work. Most of these have concerned Malraux's novels but more recently he has begun to explore Malraux's theory of art, as it is presented in works such as *The Voices of Silence* and *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*. He is continuing to write about Malraux's theory of art and recently presented a paper entitled 'André Malraux and the Function of Art' to an aesthetics conference at Sydney University.

I recently conducted an e-mail interview with Derek. Portions of this interview will be published over the next few days.

Rick Visser: You have a strong and continuing interest in Malraux. Can you say something about how you became interested in him? Is there some personal resonance you feel, some way in which he addresses questions that are your questions as much as they are his?

Derek Allan: I've been interested in theories of art generally for a long time. Malraux is seldom mentioned in books and articles on aesthetics (those in English at least), so I didn't find out about him that way. But I have a longstanding interest in French literature and it was via that route that I first encountered Malraux – his novels to begin with, and then his books on art.

I warmed to him immediately. My first reactions were: Here is someone who is not only willing to ask fundamental questions about art and its purpose, but who can also relate what he says to *specific works of art*. It was a bit like finding a history of art and a philosophy of art somehow rolled into one – but without the tedious and extraneous detail one too often finds in histories of art, and the unwillingness to come down out of the stratosphere of pure abstraction that one so often encounters in the philosophy of art and aesthetics.

I also found that Malraux helped me to see the works he discussed with new eyes. (He includes reproductions of many of them in his books, but in any case he tends to discuss works that are quite well known and accessible.) Malraux writes about art extremely well, and with a kind of contagious enthusiasm. He once described himself as 'bewitched' by visual art and when one reads *The Voices of Silence*, for example, one can well believe it.

I was also very pleased to find that art for Malraux is not just Western art. It often seems to me that, with the occasional exception, aestheticians and philosophers of art have not yet fully adjusted to the fact that art for the West is no longer just Western art. With Malraux, however, one is left in no doubt at all. Art for him includes objects as various as the cave paintings at Lascaux, African masks, Mesoamerican figurines, Egyptian sculpture, Greek sculpture, Renaissance painting, Cezanne and Picasso – and much more. And all are placed on the same footing – as art. There is no question of any hierarchy of styles – no suggestion, for example, that art has somehow 'progressed' over the millennia, or that so-called 'realism' or 'naturalism' was somehow a technical 'advance'. This all struck a very resonant chord with me. To my mind, it seemed so much in tune with how we actually respond to art now, and how we think about it. That's the case for me anyway. These were all first impressions. They still apply, but since then I have tried to deepen my understanding of Malraux and analyse exactly what he is saying. The more I read him the more I find in him. There is a view abroad in some quarters that Malraux is not a 'systematic' thinker, and that his books on art are really little more than lyrical outpourings. (One commentator, for example, writes that his account of art is 'lyrical and imaginative, rather than rational') I think that view is completely mistaken. Malraux, I would argue, is a very careful thinker. More importantly perhaps, he is a highly original thinker. I would even describe him, at the

risk of sounding a little excessive, as a *daring* thinker – ‘daring’ in the sense that he is willing to explore the *full* implications of his ideas even if they lead him to challenge assumptions about art that we might tend to regard as more or less beyond question.



RV: It is interesting that one of the first things that

‘hooked’ you on Malraux was his practice of continually relating what he says to specific works of art. In your essay, ‘André Malraux and the Challenge to Aesthetics’, you seem to give this quality of specificity even more strength. You say he actually begins to conceptualize art from specific objects rather than from big ideas like ‘beauty’ or ‘self-expression’. You also say Malraux ‘invites us to think about art in a new and quite revolutionary way.’ Is his orientation of specificity a critical part of this invitation to a ‘new and revolutionary way’ of thinking about art?

And, if so, can you say something about why you find it revolutionary?

DA: One of the reasons Malraux focuses so strongly on specific works of art is that he wants to draw our attention to the enormous change that has taken place over the last century in what we – the West – include under the rubric art. We take it for granted *now* that art includes objects such as (certain) African masks, Indian bodhisattvas, or Mesoamerican figurines. But this was certainly not taken for granted in 1900, Malraux reminds us.

One might reply: ‘Well, there was a change in taste. So what?’ But that would just trivialise the issue. What happened was not comparable to a shift in ‘taste’ from, for example, Baroque to Romantic (assuming that the notion of taste could explain even that). For the first time in human history, Malraux points out, one culture began to admire the works of *all* other cultures. Malraux calls it an ‘aesthetic revolution’ and argues – with good reason in my view – that it signified a fundamental shift in the very notion of art, and in how we respond to art. Of course the change took place little by

little over several decades, from the late Nineteenth century to the mid-Twentieth, and for many people it tended to slip by unnoticed. (I think much of what is written in aesthetics today has still not noticed it). But from our vantage point in history now, the

fact that this revolution took place stares us in the face. Personally, I don't think one can approach the philosophy of art sensibly today without taking that development into account and trying to understand its significance.

I should add that any suggestion that one might formulate a concept of art *without* some notion, however vague, of what specific objects might exemplify that concept seems to me just wishful thinking – a kind of aesthetician's daydream. Art *in vacuo* – art 'in itself' – simply doesn't exist. Even Kant, whose references to specific works are notoriously infrequent, gives us a glimpse occasionally of which works he has in mind when he speaks of art (which suggest an 'imaginary museum' very different from ours moreover...). An important feature of Malraux's writing about art is that he seeks to make it quite clear from the beginning what range of works the term 'art' covers for him – and, he implies, for contemporary Western culture generally (due allowance made for individual preferences, of course). So when he formulates his own 'big ideas', to borrow your term, one is in no doubt at all what those ideas refer to.



RV: Could it be that part of the reason Malraux's writing in art has been mostly disregarded in major disciplinary forums is that his 'revolutionary orientation' is very demanding, somewhat like asking seasoned chess players to play chess with different pieces or different values for the pieces, thus requiring a different set of skills or a different or deeper sensibility?

DA: I think there is something in what you say – especially the bit about playing with different pieces.

I said before that Malraux is a daring thinker. One consequence is that, in reading him, one needs to be prepared to look at things in new ways, and set aside one's preconceptions if necessary. I don't mean one should abandon one's powers of critical thought. On the contrary, if anything Malraux requires his readers to think more critically, and question more radically, than they have done before.

But that, of course, is often more easily said than done. The discipline of aesthetics has a fairly long history now and has tended, I think, to leave a deposit of familiar ideas that have in certain cases hardened into something like dogmas. Ideas like, for example: that art must necessarily have something to do with beauty, or that art is in some way a 'representation' of reality, or that the artist 'sees the world' more perceptively than the rest of us, or that he/she is necessarily 'more sensitive' than the rest of us, or that the artist 'expresses' himself in his work, or that works of art 'reflect' the historical period in which they are created, or that a work of art is the product of various artistic or psychological 'influences', or that the history of art is in some way a series of 'advances', or that art as we understand the idea is a human constant, common to all cultures at all times.

I don't wish to suggest that we all hold all of these views – just that *some* of them at least, and probably others I haven't mentioned, are widely regarded as more or less self-evidently true – as if they were basic 'givens' from which we start out when we begin to talk about art. Now, Malraux challenges *all* the ideas I have just listed – and more besides – in a quite fundamental way. So, if a reader happens to balk at that and is not prepared to call ideas such as those into serious question, he/she is clearly going to have a problem reading him. I suspect that, in many cases, there has been an unwillingness to do this which may explain, at least in part, why Malraux has, as you say, been 'been mostly disregarded in major disciplinary forums'. (Though I should say that this is much less so in France itself where his reputation as a novelist and art theorist has always been substantial and seems if anything to be growing with the years.)



RV: You say that some of the ideas in the discipline of aesthetics have become somewhat calcified through time. Perhaps, due to the lyrical force and 'un-footnoted' authority of Malraux's challenges to these calcifications, scholars have chosen to look the other way. Unlike the work of scholarship *per se*, which must build an argument by extensive reference to other scholars, Malraux, speaks with a kind of primal authority, an authority that arrives at its destination on foot rather than on footnote, without requiring others to carry him through difficult areas or verify the path he has chosen. As well, from a scholarly perspective, it is not easy to contain his thought; it seems to operate on a number of levels simultaneously. In essence, it is not restricted by any academic discipline. Would you agree that, even beyond his questioning of calcified assumptions, this may also be part of the reason he does not 'get more press' in academia?

DA: Yes, I think you are right. And there are some important points to be made here: First, the question of relating Malraux to particular academic disciplines. If it happened to be the case (and for reasons too lengthy to go into here, I think it *is* the case) that *by its very nature* Malraux's account of art is neither art history nor aesthetics as those terms are generally understood today, could we disqualify it on those grounds? That is, could we ignore it just because it doesn't fit neatly into any of the existing

academic categories? I think the answer is obvious. The onus in such a case is surely on scholars to look beyond the boundaries of their existing systems of thought and try to come to grips with Malraux on his own terms. (Malraux explicitly says in *The Metamorphosis of the Gods*, by the way, that he is not offering 'an aesthetic or a history of art' – so there is no mystery about that.) Now the question of references to other scholars, footnotes etc. This issue crops up quite frequently in relation to Malraux. Two examples to give the flavour: An academic at a recent conference I attended (an art historian, I think) told me that she objected to Malraux's tendency to engage in 'sweeping generalisations'. Gombrich says somewhere (in one of his sillier comments, in my view) that there is no evidence that Malraux 'ever spent a day in a library'.

Now, first of all, let's note that Malraux's books on art were written for a wide public audience, and the paraphernalia of footnotes etc is quite frequently reduced to a minimum, or even eliminated, in such cases. Second, do we expect a forest of academic cross-references when we read Sartre, Derrida or Lyotard, for example – not to mention earlier writers who discuss art theory? Why then do we ask it of Malraux? Presumably, because he frequently refers to specific works of art and specific historical events. So the moral seems to be: remain safely in the stratosphere of pure abstraction and our expectations will be lowered...

But there is a more important issue involved in all this. I have recently been reading books on Veronese and Tintoretto. Both books are written by historians of art and although they dispense with footnotes (they are intended for wide audiences) their approach would, I am sure, satisfy most art historians. We plod meticulously through the evidence for this or that event in the lives of the artists in question; we read about who probably commissioned what painting, who the figure at the bottom left or

top right might actually be. (Could it really be the self-portrait of the artist?) Etc, etc. I'm sure you know the kind of thing. It's very common in art books. Fortunately, the tedium was alleviated in these two instances by the excellent quality of the reproductions.

Now, we might say, there appears to be no risk of 'sweeping generalisations' in books such as these. Academic caution everywhere. All the evidence is carefully weighed. Etc. But is it as simple as that? Surely the *whole approach* implies a sweeping generalisation. There is an assumption on every page that the kind of minute detail, and the agonising over this or that bit of biographical evidence, is important. Nowhere is that even questioned. Indeed, how often is it questioned in art history generally? This is not to excuse inaccuracy – and, incidentally, Malraux himself was at great pains in everything he wrote to be as accurate as the scholarship of his time allowed (very little ever seems finally settled in the field of art history). But the key question to be asked in any discussion of art – visual, literary, or musical – is surely whether the commentary one is offered seems valuable and enlightening. Does it help bring the work *alive* for the reader? Does it reveal aspects of the work that help the reader *respond* to it (as distinct from just accumulate facts about it)? So, at bottom, there is a question of methodology – of *theory* – underlying all this apparent appeal to 'objectivity' and 'evidence'. The question we need to ask is not simply: are there lots of 'facts', references to other researchers, footnotes, etc, but what is the writer trying to *do*? And does he succeed in doing it? Once again, it's a question of leaving one's preconceptions at the door and trying to approach Malraux on his own terms – which is surely the least one can do for any writer.



RV: Let me turn for a moment to another important idea, one with which he begins *The Voices of Silence*, the idea of the 'Museum without Walls'. In your article ('André Malraux and the Challenge of Aesthetics') you refer to it as a vast art collection 'in our minds'. Is he speaking here only of a kind of visual memory of works we have seen, or is he trying to establish something more fundamental with this idea?

DA: Yes, you are right to draw attention to this. The reference in my article was necessarily rather abbreviated and a bit more should be said.

First, Malraux's notion of the 'Museum without Walls' recognises that much of what we regard as art cannot physically be moved into museums even if we wanted to (the Sistine Chapel, the sculptures at Chartres, the frescos at Ajanta, etc). But it is also linked to the point I made earlier about the vast expansion in our world of art that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th century. Art now is no longer, as it had been for some four centuries, Greek and Roman art plus Western art since the Renaissance. Now it is the art of all cultures and all times. So, as Malraux points out, no art museum, no matter how well endowed, could hope to contain

all that we now regard as art. The 'musée imaginaire' is thus, one might say, our 'ideal museum' – the imaginary one that contains all the works we regard as works of art no matter where they might be.

Secondly, our 'musée imaginaire' is made up of those works that are *important* to us – works that we respond to, admire, and love. That implies two things. First, the mere fact of something *being in* an art museum does not necessarily mean it belongs in our 'musée imaginaire' – because we may be indifferent to it. (Food for thought for the institutionalist theorist there...) And second, *your* 'musée imaginaire' may differ somewhat from mine, or from someone else's. Malraux, however, believes there are large areas of agreement about what we would all admit to our 'museums without walls'. In the Introduction to his *Imaginary Museum of World Sculpture*, for example, he writes the following about the seven hundred photographs of sculpture he has gathered together: 'Undoubtedly other people's choices would have differed from mine. But anyone today who knows what a work of art is would agree with three quarters of them, and the remainder would not be the same for everyone.'

Finally, I should add that Malraux does not regard the 'musée imaginaire' as a static concept – that is, he is not arguing that its 'contents' are fixed once and for all. His notion of art is very strongly linked to the idea of change. But that issue would take me a long way and I will leave matters there for now.



RV: You say in your article that Malraux does not view art as 'a permanent category of human experience', that it is 'time-bound', 'subject

to change and potential consignment to oblivion'. You speak of this as 'the most radical challenge Malraux represents. I am reminded of the words of Ortega y Gasset quoted in Antonio Huéscar's book, 'José Ortega y Gasset's Metaphysical Innovation':

"To date, philosophy has always shown a utopian face. This is why every system involved a claim to validity for all times and all men. Abstracting from any living, historical, and perspectival dimension, philosophy renewed, time and again and in vain, its effort to become definitive. In opposition to this tendency, I have proposed a theoretical account in which the role of standpoints [is acknowledged. Accordingly, I contend that] a system should incorporate into itself, in an articulate fashion, the living perspective from which it originated...(xI)."

Am I correct in thinking this is similar to Malraux's view? If in the above quotation we replace the word 'philosophy' with 'philosophy of art', would we have something quite proximate to Malraux's view?

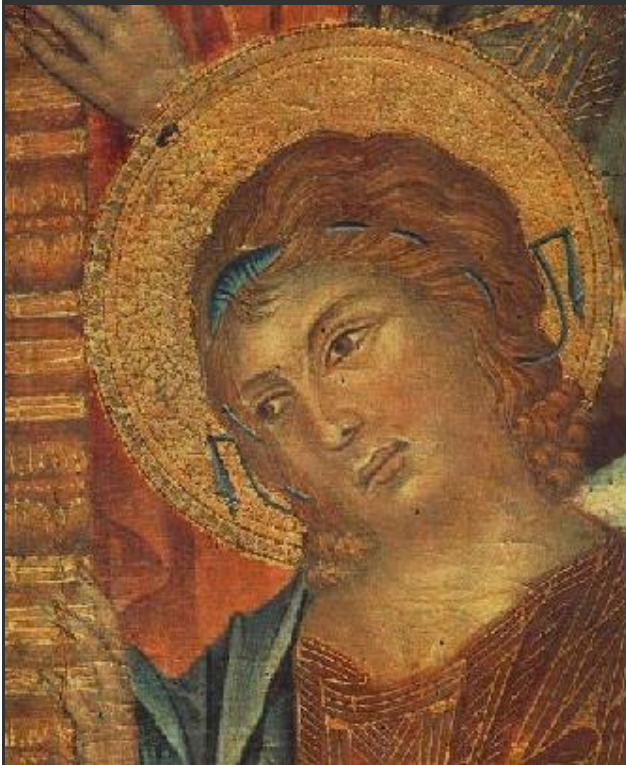
DA: I'm not familiar enough with Ortega y Gasset's work to attempt a comparison, but this quote certainly suggests some affinities with Malraux. It raises the thorny but important question of the relationship between art and time which, to my mind, is an area in which Malraux makes one of his most remarkable – if rarely appreciated – contributions to the philosophy of art.

I was recently reading Anthony Savile's book *The Test of Time* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) which is one of the few books in modern aesthetics I'm aware of that tries to tackle the question of art and time. But while it's interesting, Savile's analysis, in my view, mainly serves to highlight the dilemma in which aesthetics now finds itself where this question is concerned. On the one

hand, we have the longstanding aesthetic tradition suggesting that great art is timeless or eternal. On other hand, there's the powerful stream of thought originating with writers like Hegel and Taine, and carried forward by various post-Marxist writers (Eagleton is a well-known current example), that art, like all other aspects of human activity, is part of historical experience. Both theories, as we know, run into major problems, a number of which are highlighted in Savile's book. So we quickly reach an impasse. One can of course retreat into an area like analytic aesthetics where the question is discreetly swept under the carpet. But even then it doesn't really stay under the carpet because the determinedly ahistorical nature of that kind of aesthetics ends up implying that art is, to borrow Ortega's words, 'for all times and all men' – i.e. one has really opted for the timeless idea by default. How does Malraux deal with the question of art and time? I'll have to limit myself to a couple of points. Essentially, he rejects the idea – which is far more deeply entrenched in our thinking than we realise – that a work of art is *fixed* in its nature – that it is created 'once and for all' even though subsequent generations might find a range of different meanings in it. For Malraux, a work of art is *by its very nature* 'born to metamorphosis' as he puts it, whether its creator is aware of this or not. This proposition is hard to assimilate at first (it was for me anyway), but once one grasps Malraux's meaning, one sees what a powerful idea it is. He is not dismissing the context in which the work of art comes into being. To that extent, the work does have 'one foot in history' so to speak – whether it be the world of an ancient civilisation or of a more recent period. But that, for Malraux, is only the work's point of departure, from which it then sets out on its journey of metamorphosis – which may sometimes result in it being consigned to oblivion for long periods (as Egyptian art was for two millennia, for example) and at other times lead to its rebirth,

though always in a different form – as the Pharaoh's sacred image is now reborn as a 'work of art' for instance.

I'm conscious that this highly condensed account risks sounding rather puzzling, if not incoherent. There's a lot more to be said on this issue but I hope this at least gives some idea of Malraux's position. A key point to note, going back to the point from which I started out, is that the work of art for Malraux is *neither* eternal *nor* embedded in historical time. He is offering us an entirely new conception of the relationship between art and time – one which in my view is well worth our close study.



RV: This is very helpful, very rich territory, not only in relation to the objects we call art but, as well, in relation to the process of making art; taking this further, there is, it seems to me, a 'journey of metamorphosis' within the process itself. I would like to explore this more but it would take us too far from Malraux. Let me ask you a question on a somewhat different topic. I know you recently presented a paper entitled 'André

Malraux and the Function of Art' to an aesthetics conference at Sydney University. In your title, the word 'function' is singular. This surprises me a bit. Were you suggesting in your paper that there is only one function of art?

DA: Your point is well taken but it raises an issue that I might find a little difficult to respond to in a few words. On some occasions, Malraux uses the term art to designate what he also terms the fundamental 'creative act' – which he regards as having always been the same since the dawn of human history. This is the sense in which I use the word art in the paper you mention. That allows me to discuss Malraux's proposition that art is an 'anti-destin', or a 'revolt against man's fate' as that phrase has been rendered in English. This, incidentally, is possibly the kind of proposition that has turned some aestheticians away from Malraux, on the grounds that it sounds perhaps too ...vague and metaphorical? If so, that assessment has been too hasty because Malraux makes it quite clear what he means by the word 'destin'. Moreover, one always needs to bear in mind that the subject under discussion is *art*, and it is by no means self-evident that a writing style confined to the rather narrow lexicon we are accustomed to in aesthetics will be more appropriate or enlightening in this context than a style such as Malraux's that at times becomes quite evocative, even poetic.

However, to get back to your question, it is certainly true that, in Malraux's view, the creative achievement that we today name 'art' has not always been directed to the same end. Indeed, he insists very strongly on this point. In Ancient Egypt, for example, as he points out, the concept 'art' was non-existent and the purpose of those objects from Egyptian culture that we now call art was, quite specifically, to promote the well-being of the departed in the Afterlife. That was their function, their very *raison d'être*. One can find many similar examples in other cultures.

Malraux wants a theory of art that fully acknowledges this – a theory that does not try to fudge the issue by claiming that, irrespective of what they may have said or done, the Egyptians ‘really’ saw their Pharaoh’s image in his mortuary chapel as what we term ‘art’, or, as some try to argue, as an instance of ‘the beautiful’. An important element in the theory Malraux develops is the idea of ‘metamorphosis’ that I have briefly discussed.

I should add that Malraux’s willingness to confront this issue squarely is one of the reasons why I think he merits our close attention. It is, to my mind, one of the key questions facing aesthetics today, and one to which it has so far failed to give a good response, or even to raise in clear, unambiguous terms. Malraux is seeking – and to my mind successfully finds – a theory of art that deals with this (among many other things). He explains how it comes about, and especially what it *signifies*, that we today have art museums (or ‘museums without walls’) that house both Picassos and Pre-Columbian sculptures, Van Goghs and African masks – all of which we regard as art, and in many instances as great art. If there were no other reason – and I think there are many – I would consider this sufficient grounds to recommend a careful reading of Malraux.

RV: With that, I think we will have to bring this interview to a close. Thank you very much for taking the time to do this. I appreciate it very much. One last question: Are you planning any future work on Malraux and aesthetics?

DA: Yes, definitely. In the immediate future I want to write something on Malraux’s understanding of the relationship between art and time – the issue we were discussing a short while ago. Speaking more broadly, I think the philosophy of art is an important field of study – more important than its current status in the academic arena might sometimes lead one to conclude –

and I want to try to contribute to thinking and discussions in that field. Malraux is a very rich resource – if I can put it that way – and I think he has a lot to offer such discussions. So I would like to foster a wider interest in what he has to say.

RV: Thanks again! I wish you the very best!

DA: Thank you for the opportunity. If I have sparked an interest in Malraux among any of your readers, I will consider my time to have been very well spent!