

A Journey of Discovery on the River of Life: Blood and the Art of Eric Orr

Rory Johnstone (Northumbria University)

In the author's note to the book *The River of Life: the Story of Man's Blood from Magic to Science* published in 1962, Bernard Seeman wrote:

Our knowledge of the blood was long and hard in coming. Ignorance, superstition and dogma have cloaked the blood in mystery almost from the beginning. Among those who challenged ignorance to explore the river of life are many heroes and even a few martyrs. What they have given us is a map of the river, a description of much of its course and a glimpse into many of the events that take place along its route.

In addition, and in some ways as important as the knowledge they provided, they have made us better able to perceive the areas of darkness that still remain. By helping us define what we do not know, they have set our steps in the direction of knowing.¹

Viewing the metaphorical 'river of life' as flowing through history, Seeman saw its course as having been plotted by those 'heroes' such as Galen, Vesalius and Harvey whose discoveries led mankind on a journey out of the darkness of superstition and magic and into the light of 'pure' rational science. As such, and as the subtitle suggests, the book was an attempt to trace the history of man's knowledge of blood. Blood is of course vital to us all; it is, as Seeman would have it, the 'river of life', journeying throughout the body carrying the necessary nourishment and oxygen required for organic survival. Yet it also carries with it the various associations and layers of meaning accreted over time which lend it not only a biological, but also a cultural/political significance. Indeed, going beyond the scope of

¹ Bernard Seeman, *The River of Life: The Story of Man's Blood from Magic to Science* (London: Museum Press Limited, 1962), p. 8.

Seeman's investigation it can be seen that it is a substance endowed with an enormous symbolism; a fluid rich in associations far in excess of its biological functions. It has been assigned a unique importance in the history of every people in the world, noted for linking them 'so closely and intimately that every difference of colour, religious belief and cultural heritage is insignificant beside it.'²

Blood is, therefore, a 'river' that flows not simply throughout the body but through history and across cultures, twisting and turning on a convoluted and complex route, on whose banks lie meanings, associations and symbolisms which stir up emotions and evoke many powerful images in the popular imagination. The apogee of purity, the nadir of filth, the basis for unity, the justification for war, the bringer of life and a source of death and having 'magical associations that exceed its biological functions, blood encompasses a spectrum of meanings that are complex, controversial and often contradictory.'³ Unsurprisingly then, the 'river of life' has proven to be an area ripe for exploration by others working in fields very different to the scientific investigations envisioned by Seeman.

In his essay 'Art in the Dark' written in 1981, the critic Thomas McEvelley argued convincingly that there was a significant tendency in contemporary art that could be interpreted as 'an attempt [...] to reconstitute something like the fullness of the shamanic role within the art realm.'⁴ In an introductory paragraph that echoes Seeman's author's note, McEvelley states his belief that through the development of the conceptual and performance art genres:

² Richard M. Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy*, ed. by Ann Oakley and John Ashton, rev. edn. (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 61.

³ Eric A. Feldman and Ronald Bayer, 'Understanding the Blood Feuds', in *Blood Feuds: AIDS, Blood, and the Politics of Medical Disaster*, ed. by Eric A. Feldman and Ronald Bayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 1-16 (p. 2).

⁴ Thomas McEvelley, 'Art in the Dark', *Artforum* (Summer 1983), 62-71 (p. 66).

art activity flowed into the darkness beyond its traditional boundaries and explored areas that were previously as unmapped and mysterious as the other side of the moon.⁵

The artworks themselves were ‘like the fragmentary journals of explorers in new lands, filled with apparently unanswerable questions.’⁶

Less than ten years after Seeman’s book was published, the North American artist Eric Orr (1939-1998), as if to illustrate the point later made by McEvelley, created *Blood Shadow* (1971), a departure from his previous work which was to point towards the themes which were to become the major preoccupations within his oeuvre from here on:

Eric Orr and a friend carried a sheet of tempered glass (3 by 9 feet) onto the Venice, California, beach on the night of a full moon. One side of the glass had been covered with the artist’s blood, blown on by mouth and straw, as paleolithic painters are thought to have done. The glass was laid waveside where Orr’s helper stood so his mooncast shadow fell upon it. Orr scraped away the blood outside the shadow, leaving a human silhouette. The glass was now, by sympathetic magic, a kind of ‘person’, made of Orr’s blood, his friend’s shadow, moonlight and wavesound. This entranced or moonstruck person was now to be launched out of space-time, back to the primal beginning. The glass was crated and transported to the plain of Giza, just south of modern Cairo, Egypt. When the moon rose, Orr uncrated the glass by the Mycerinus pyramid. Calculating the position, he dug a pit (3 by 9 by 1 feet) in the sand where the shadow of the pyramid apex would fall at moonset. The glass was laid face up in the gravelike pit. As the moon approached the horizon the shadow of the pyramid apex (from which the soul of the pharaoh Mycerinus was to launch itself into the eternity of the circumpolar sky) glided slowly up the blood-self on the glass and tapped lightly at the brainpan just before moonset, summoning its spirit. When the moon disappeared, the glass was buried.⁷

⁵ McEvelley, ‘Art in the Dark’, p. 62.

⁶ McEvelley, ‘Art in the Dark’, p. 62.

⁷ Eric Orr, Thomas McEvelley and James Lee Byars, *Eric Orr: A Twenty-Year Survey* (San Diego: S.D.S.U. Art Council, 1984), p. 37. In fact, this description has also appeared in subtly different forms in, for example, Thomas McEvelley, ‘Journeys in and out of the Body: Proto-Materialism of Eric Orr’, *Images & Issues* (Spring 1981), 18-20; Thomas

Orr's career as an artist began in 1964 with the exhibition of the nihilistic Neo-Dada sculpture *Colt .45*, in which he mounted a loaded Colt .45 pistol in such a way that it pointed directly at a chair in which the viewer was intended to sit. On the floor, placed where the viewer's foot might rest – in what can only be seen as an invitation to suicide – was a treadle wired to the trigger of the gun. After moving to Los Angeles in 1966, Orr began focusing on installations as he became associated with artists such as James Turrell and Robert Irwin whose work, which investigated and manipulated the perceptual process, was often grouped together under the term 'Light and Space Art'. Orr's work, however, was distinguished from that of his contemporaries by his metaphysical concerns. His fascination with mysticism, Egyptian magic, the occult and most explicitly shamanism, first came to light in the enigmatic *Blood Shadow*. Never exhibited, it was first written about in 1981 by Thomas McEvelley – a close friend of Orr, McEvelley is important in relation to Orr's art in that his writings both document it and provide it with a critical/theoretical framework which is often reinforced by their frequent collaborations – who viewed it as a moment of self-discovery for the artist, 'an acting out of the theme of travelling out of the body, back to the beginning. It was less a single object than a performance, or a ritual journey, involving an object.'⁸ Later, in ever more complex installations such as *Sunrise* (1976) or *Silence and the Ion Wind* (1981) created from light, shadow and space in combination with 'cosmic' alchemical materials such as gold, lead, silence and streams of negative ions, Orr continually strove to represent the 'void'. Indeed, it became the artist's stated intention to attempt to 'discover how to get the

McEvelley, 'Negative Presences in Secret Spaces: The Art of Eric Orr', *Artforum* (Summer 1982), 58-66; and Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999).

⁸ Thomas McEvelley, 'Journeys in and out of the Body: Proto-Materialism of Eric Orr', *Images & Issues* (Spring 1981), 18-20 (p. 18-19).

sense of the void into an object'⁹ and, as McEvelley has noted, this was to be a thread which would run throughout all of Orr's work from *Blood Shadow* onward.

Increasingly, he looked towards shamanic practices to inform his art, even travelling to Zaire and the New Hebrides in order to make contact with practising shamans. Indeed, it was whilst visiting Zaire that Orr was encouraged by the tribal members with whom he made contact to use blood as part of his art. He taught them the technique of gold-leafing, hoping that they would incorporate it into their work, and in return he learned various things from them, including the use of blood.¹⁰ The fruit of his research is most apparent in the series of paintings or 'wall-objects' begun in 1980. As Orr explained:

All my paintings have my blood in them, by the way. [...] It is a very primitive system that comes out of shamanic practices, which is where art ultimately begins. I've traced it back to there.¹¹

(Orr's claim that all of his paintings have his blood in them is, in fact, not strictly true as some of his later paintings such as *Marin Red Void* (1996) and *Blue Atmosphere* (1998) are straightforward oil on linen.) Drawing his own blood, he incorporated it into some of his work to produce paintings such as *R-2* (1982) which were superficially similar in appearance to those of Barnett Newman with vertical bands of colour over large monochrome grounds. Others, such as *Myriad Oceans of Time* (1987) or *Without Blue #3* (1987), produce an effect similar to diffused light; rectangles of luminous colour 'float' over the surface of the paintings suggesting an indefinite space

⁹ Eric Orr quoted in McEvelley, 'Journeys in and out of the Body: Proto-Materialism of Eric Orr', p. 18.

¹⁰ Judi Freeman, 'Chronologies: Artists and the Spiritual', in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. by Maurice Tuchman and others (New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986), pp. 393-419 (p. 413); Thomas McEvelley, (24/04/2005). *Eric Orr* [e-mail to author].

¹¹ Eric Orr quoted in Jan Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), p. 168.

in a manner reminiscent of the work of Mark Rothko. Yet there is a fundamental difference between these works and the classical Modernism of Newman or Rothko for in Orr's work, the materials used are chosen for their 'magical' value and cultural associations which work in interpenetration with the formal values of the surface design of the paintings. Using his own blood in combination with other esoteric materials such as gold, lead, powdered human bone and meteorite dust, these works were read by McEvelley as an attempt 'to reconstitute the fullness of the shamanic role in the art realm, to re-establish the artwork as the locus of magical and therapeutic force, like the power object of the shaman.'¹² For Orr:

If one is alluding to our temporary position on the planet earth, then one of the best ways to do it is to use materials that directly relate to that. Given the power within the material itself, the mind will give you the rest.¹³

The effect his materials have was, for him, integral to his work as Orr believed that the viewer would react not just to the colour relations in his paintings, but also to the invisible or 'vibratory' presence of the original materials. While finding it necessary to use 'real' things in an attempt to produce objects with a presence that is unique and out of the ordinary, Orr noticed that by 'using these kinds of materials (such as blood and bone and ash) I see responses like eyes closing.'¹⁴ Here the artist acknowledges the 'chill' that runs through the viewer upon realisation of the nature of the materials present in the work. Indeed this was precisely the reaction he was attempting to provoke with his choice of materials:

I realize the integrity of certain materials. They have their own kind of voice. It's like an animistic view of materials. There's life within any substance and it's the combining of

¹² Thomas McEvelley, 'Negative Presences in Secret Spaces: The Art of Eric Orr', *Artforum* (Summer 1982), 58-66 (p. 62).

¹³ Eric Orr quoted in Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space*, p. 168.

¹⁴ Eric Orr quoted in Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space*, p. 167.

those elements, so that they really bespeak something to the human, which I want to achieve... I'm trying to combine beauty and the 'chill factor,' which, simply stated, is that you become hooked initially by simple beauty, and then are taken some other place.¹⁵

From this McEvelley drew the conclusion that in Orr's paintings, 'the conceptual point of the materials is profound: we see the void within our own bodies.'¹⁶ This is perhaps most explicit not in his paintings but in *The Matter of 0*, a page in the lavish exhibition catalogue/artist's book published in conjunction with Orr's exhibition at Anders Tornberg Gallery in Lund, Sweden, where Orr has created a zero – for zero substitute 'the void' which he associates with it – with a round rubber stamp of his own blood.¹⁷

Noting that the strength of the type of work investigated in 'Art in the Dark' (and by extension Eric Orr's work) lies in its ability to open up new options in the standard weave of everyday motivations, options which are undefined due to the lack of a surrounding belief system, McEvelley concluded that: 'the radicality of work in this genre can be appraised precisely by how far it has allowed the boundaries of the art category to dissolve'¹⁸. For Orr 'blood harkens back to the early stages of mankind; as a primitive image it makes art stronger, gives it more presence.'¹⁹ Yet for Cynthia Freeland ritual theory cannot account for 'the sometimes strange, intense activities of modern artists, as when a performance artist uses blood.'²⁰ To her, a theory of art as ritual could be plausible due to its ability to produce symbolic value through the use of ceremonies, gestures and artefacts. Yet she asserts that to provide meaning in terms of catharsis, sacrifice or initiation requires the background reinforcement of pervasive

¹⁵ Eric Orr quoted in Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space*, p. 167.

¹⁶ McEvelley, 'Negative Presences in Secret Spaces: The Art of Eric Orr', p. 65.

¹⁷ Eric Orr, Thomas McEvelley and James Lee Byars, *Zero Mass: The Art of Eric Orr* (Lund, Sweden: AB Propexus, 1990), p. 15.

¹⁸ McEvelley, 'Art in the Dark', p. 70.

¹⁹ Eric Orr quoted in Douglas Brenner, 'L.A. Dream House', *Architectural Record*, 173 (February 1985), 134-141 (p. 134).

²⁰ Cynthia Freeland, *But is it Art?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 4.

community belief. This is something she finds lacking in contemporary art in which blood is present because, in her view, it fails to create meaningful associations but rather promotes entertainment and profit, leading her to conclude that in the competitive market that is the art world, ‘artists need any edge they can get, including shock value.’²¹

So why is blood in art associated with shock value? Why are such works loaded with ambiguity, a fact McEvelley obliquely points to in ‘Art in the Dark’ where he considers some work to be worthy of appraisal whilst other work is dismissed in an endnote as being ‘sensationalistic in motivation’?²² Indeed, this ambiguity is often even acknowledged by the artists themselves: Yves Klein, for example, having used blood for its occult/ritual associations to produce body prints in the early 1960s, would later destroy them fearing their ‘diabolical’ occult nature.²³ Orr has acknowledged this too when talking of the ‘chill factor’ in his work and when he says, ‘I’m using ju-ju on the practitioner, the maker, *me*. It *does* affect you a little bit. I spook myself sometimes. I spook myself a *lot*.’²⁴

In her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas, whilst discussing theories surrounding the concept of pollution, asked why bodily refuse such as spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears should be symbolic of danger and of power and why especially bodily margins have often been thought to be invested with power and danger.²⁵ In answer to these questions Douglas explained that the orifices of the body can be seen to symbolise its specially vulnerable points and that that which issues from them, spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears, by journeying across the boundaries of the body,

²¹ Freeland, *But is it Art?*, p. 6.

²² McEvelley, ‘Art in the Dark’, endnote 38 on p. 71.

²³ Thomas McEvelley, ‘Conquistador of the Void’, in *Yves Klein 1928-1962: A Retrospective*, ed. by Yves Klein and others (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982), pp. 19-87 (p. 74); Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein* (Stuttgart: Cantz, 1994), p. 185.

²⁴ Eric Orr quoted in Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space*, p. 168.

²⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, new edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 149.

becomes the most obvious of marginal matter. Yet, though bodily symbolism obviously reaches deeply into the individual's bodily and emotional experience, there is, for Douglas, no reason to assume primacy for this over the individual's cultural and social experience. Indeed, for Douglas, all margins could be viewed as dangerous and it is crucial to her analysis to not 'treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins.'²⁶ Moreover, as Douglas notes, due to the vulnerability in any structure of ideas lying at its margins, in manipulating them 'the shape of fundamental experience is altered.'²⁷ Thus, readings of art in which blood is present are intimately bound to the fact that it is both pushing at the boundaries of the art category *and* it is shocking. Indeed it is shocking not only because it includes blood which has journeyed across the boundaries of the body but also *because* it is pushing at the boundaries of the art category.

Writing about Piero Camporesi's *Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood*, a study of the cultural import of blood in Renaissance Europe, Umberto Eco concluded that:

Camporesi reconstructs feelings, terrors, and loves that have seemed ancient to us, and invites us *to look within ourselves*. To grasp the obscure rapport between rites and myths of the past and our impulses of today.²⁸

Orr's use of blood in his paintings works in a similar manner. With Western society becoming increasingly sanitised in character, blood, in its actuality, is largely speaking not seen: animal slaughter in abattoirs, menstruation and the practice of self-mutilation, for example, are generally hidden from view and rarely discussed. Though we are bombarded by bloody images of warfare and violence almost constantly, these images are mediated by

²⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 150.

²⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 150.

²⁸ Umberto Eco, 'Foreword', in Piero Camporesi, *Juice of life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood*, trans. by Robert R. Barr (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 7-11 (p. 10-11).

television and film – we stand at a remove from them just as we do from the blood of the abattoir. In an era in which wars are portrayed as being conducted through seemingly bloodless ‘clean strikes’, blood has become the reserve of the scientists and surgeons described by Seeman. This is in contrast to the daily reality experienced by our forebears. As Piero Camporesi notes:

The taste of blood permeated yesterday’s violent, cruel, immoderate society. From birth to death, the sight and smell of blood were part of the human and social pilgrimage of each and all. [...] Heads impaled on stakes or nailed to doors, corpses left to rot and putrefy in the tower cages, cadavers hung on windows with hooks, ‘quarters’ abandoned at crossroads... the butcher shop that hacked up persons merged imperceptibly with the one that slit open the throats of bulky beasts slaughtered in the open. Small animals were killed and bled in kitchens and yards. Barbers, phlebotomists, pork butchers, midwives, brothers hospitalers, opened, closed, cauterized veins with appalling indifference.²⁹

An art in which blood was present, such as Eric Orr’s, would have been meaningless under such circumstances. Yet today we live in an ‘antiseptic’ society, one in which blood is almost invisible. Though we recognise its importance we generally try to avoid direct contact with even our own blood, preferring instead to view it as ‘of interest only to surgeons and the scholars of the new planetary pestilences.’³⁰ Orr, however, invites the viewer to investigate the nature of blood through his art which, for him, is inextricably linked to ritual. For Mary Douglas, ‘rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body.’³¹ By acting out the form of social relations, rituals provide them with visible expression thus enabling people to know their own society.

²⁹ Camporesi, *Juice of Life*, p. 27.

³⁰ Eco, ‘Foreword’, in Camporesi, *Juice of Life*, pp. 7-11 (p. 10-11).

³¹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 159.

Thus, by making blood visible again, Orr shows us how vital it is to us all: vital not simply in a biological but also a cultural sense, as the formally abstract nature of Orr's paintings is used to relay something essentially abstract and complex about the nature of blood. Through the process of making blood visible in his art, Orr paradoxically exploits its everyday invisibility and the 'chill factor' associated with it as a means to explore its power to transport the viewer. He invites the viewer to journey within himself, to go beyond the visual sense when viewing these works, 'to use (or discover) senses he may not have been aware of before.'³² By using materials like blood 'drawn from the living matter of immediate human experience – from a shaman's cave rather than a chemist's laboratory'³³ he goes beyond Seeman's reductive view of blood as a simple biological fact. His paintings allow the viewer to explore the essentially abstract nature of blood, to view it as a vital fluid with the power to evoke a multitude of images due to its unique cultural status. Orr's paintings make use of blood to explore the very areas of darkness Seeman saw fit to consign to history; for Orr, the story of man's blood is another altogether. The rationality of Seeman's science has no room for the shock or 'chill factor' produced by blood: it is simply a by-product of the incomprehension brought about by ignorance. Yet, by exploiting the marginal value of blood, an artist such as Eric Orr explicitly manipulates the shock value associated with it in an era in which it has all but disappeared from view; pushing and pulling at margins in order to alter the shape of fundamental experience and hence discover something we have forgotten about ourselves – blood moves us in ways far removed from its status as biological fact. As Kathy O' Dell has written when discussing artists' work which is 'profoundly moving, if disturbing'³⁴:

³² McEvelley, 'Negative Presences in Secret Spaces: The Art of Eric Orr', p. 62.

³³ McEvelley, 'Negative Presences in Secret Spaces: The Art of Eric Orr', p. 65.

³⁴ Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. xiv.

In being disturbed we ask questions. In being moved, we seek answers.³⁵

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³⁵ O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*, p. xiv.

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