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Into the Light

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The Two Horns of Phaedrus (2012)

by Mark Clare

Mark Clare's work offers the audience an opportunity to reflect and, at times, wonder at the accepted norms built around us, as the artist seeks to engage and highlight unresolved incongruities within society. Commissioned by the Arts Council, as part of *Into the Light*, Mark Clare's new work, *The Two Horns of Phaedrus* (2012), investigates ideas of 'quality' and considers this idea in relation to the perception of art and the characteristics of an art collection.

The Two Horns of Phaedrus consists of two parts. A large 'Mondrian' flag is made from shovel handles, tarpaulin, gaffer tape and recycled steel. The flag is often associated with revolutionary activities, however, Clare's flag, constructed from discarded material, is representative of a failed ideology (Modernism) that once embraced technology, purportedly for the benefit of all mankind. And within each block of colour remains an inherent optimism, or as Mondrian would have offered within his context of non-representational painting, 'the basic forms of beauty'. The second part of the work consists of a collection of coloured gaffer or parcel tapes, each attached to a tape-dispenser. These dispensers have been modified and affixed to a small motor as a stand-alone structure that is only activated by the presence of a viewer. Once activated the flag undulates in the wind seemingly created by the revolving tape-dispensers.

Mark Clare takes as his starting point a reference to a particular dilemma in Robert Maynard Pirsig's philosophical novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* where the lead character Phaedrus is asked to consider the idea of 'quality':

*"Does undefined 'quality' exist in the things we observe?
Or is it subjective, existing only in the observer?"*

This dilemma relates to the mind-matter conundrum that has been frustrating philosophers for centuries. A dilemma (which is Greek for "two premises") has been likened to the front end of a charging bull. In the book, Phaedrus solves the dilemma by neatly rejecting both horns:

"Quality is not objective It doesn't reside in the material world [left horn]. Quality is not subjective. It doesn't reside merely in the mind [right horn]. Quality is neither a part of mind, nor is it a part of matter. It is a third entity which is independent of the two."

Today technology is often blamed for many of society's ills often impacting on the 'quality' of life and, for many, there is ugliness inherent in technology. Yet technology is simply the making of things and the making of things can't by its own nature be ugly or there would be no possibility for beauty in the arts. A root of the word technology, *techne*, originally meant 'art'. Interestingly, the ancient Greeks never separated art from manufacture in their minds, and so never developed separate words for them.

Clare's objects have functionality and at the same time incorporate a basic aspect of 'technology' in their production. However, when the objects are isolated and re-presented as seen in the gallery, the artwork aims to promote discussion and consideration as to whether the 'quality' we expect from art exists in the art object – which in this context is the flag or, in the observer's mind – as represented by the revolving tape dispenser axle when activated by the viewer. Or, is 'quality' independent of the two; in the unseen power of the wind which blows the flag?

In a creative sense 'the two horns' (mind/matter) could be articulated or located within the aesthetic versus content debate of an artwork, with the meaning or feeling for the artwork located in the space between the aesthetic and content. These questions of how quality is determined also apply when assessing the selection and purchase of works for an art collection and to the challenges of re-presenting and recontextualising artworks within the collection.

Eventually, the hero Phaedrus solves the conundrum of wherein lies 'quality', by concluding that to truly experience 'quality' one must both embrace and apply it as best fits the requirements of the situation.

**Curatorial statement by Dawn Williams,
Curator, Crawford Art Gallery
November 2012**

Mark Clare

BA (Hons) Fine Art Sculpture, St. Martins College of Art & Design (1992)
MA Fine Art, University of Ulster (2004)

- 2012:** *Art Nomads* Lademoen Kunstnerverksteder (LKV), Trondheim
TENSE, Limerick City Gallery of Art
- 2011:** *Dream House* La Grange Art Museum, Georgia
CUBE Open Centre for the Urban Built Environment, Manchester
Terrible Beauty - Art, Crisis, Change & The Office of Non-Compliance Dublin Contemporary
LUMEN Video Art Festival, New York
With Hands and Feet, Torrence Art Museum, California
- 2010:** *My World is Over*, The Red House, Syracuse, New York;
The LAB, Dublin & Galway Arts Centre.