Tensegrity from Greece to Cambridge

by Guy Nordenson

Dr. Hugh Kenner was at MIT last Wednesday for an informal talk sponsored by the Course XXI Society (as "unofficial lectures" are known), Kenner, a Professor of Twentieth Century Literature at Johns Hopkins University, is the author of books on Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and R. Buckminster Fuller.

Kenner brought along a Tensegrity Sphere to illustrate his remarks. The Tensegrity (tensional integrity) is the single element that binds the principles which extended include those of the famous Geodesics. The Tensegrity Sphere is made up of 12 sticks (actually dowels) held in 4 intersecting planes by 6 pins extending from their ends. The Tensegrity is particularly useful for demonstration purposes since it effectively separates the compressive and tensile stresses respectively along the sticks and wire. The wire then lies outside and the dowels lie on the sphere outlined by their points of intersection.

Centering on this sphere Kenner continued, using its matrices of differentiating tensions and compression to illustrate aspects of Pound's and other's poetry. He explained his notion of the space between words, noting that early Greek did not originally include. Greek was originally written across the page that it was then around and around and again forward, much as a plough runs across a field. The space between words most likely came along with the philosophic differentiation of a continuous "real" into particular "ideas." Anyone who has listened to a foreign language which they did not understand can attest to the tendency of the words to run into one another. At most, phrases may be isolated, but it is only in the written language that the words separate.

It is only in 19th century France that the modern, gothic other-wise, of this late addition to the alphabet was fully understood and implemented as a poetic device by poets and in particular Stephane Mallarmé who gave these "silences" their place in verse. Through Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot and later William Carlos Williams this element entered English verse. Both poets made different use of this technique, the former using its system of directing attention to the word "dowels inside the sphere outlined by the Tensegrity" so that it effectively separates the tensional integrity of the structure. The whole thing is sufficiently fleshed out. According to Kenner this process underlies much of contemporary literature and to some extent other arts.

The evening was essentially Fuller-esque, extending over an astonishingly wide range of topics. Like Fuller, Kenner does not prepare his lectures, but instead will let the topic emerge from a rather free-flowing exposition of his extensive knowledge.

Heroin from Turkey to Long Island

by Michael D. McNamara

The Heron Trail

By the Staff and Editors of Newsday

Ripley and Winston. $8.95, 313pp.

The events of the 1960s — antiwar protests, counterculture, civil rights, racial violence, and so forth — caught many American institutions unawar, but certainly none more so than the press. Reporters and editors found that, while they had no problem with riots or marches or demonstrations, the root issues which they should have been covering were the causes of the lookers, rioters, and demonstrations — unemployment, poverty, the lack of opportunities, education, and so forth. Reporters and editors are wont to do when they find themselves unable to cover something that they should be covering. They fell back upon official explanations and pat theories to account for the unrest. They really didn't know how to explain (and perhaps could not have explained in terms of standard journalism) the major changes that were going on, much as anything else, accounts for the birth of the alternative press, the new journalism, and other such forms in that troubled decade.

Drug coverage by the media is an extreme case of that weakness. Reporters didn't know anything about drugs or the drug culture; drug users could not be depended upon to be "credible sources;" there was nothing available to report but the official side, which promptly became folk wisdom, common knowledge, and accepted dogma — right or wrong. Even the most comprehensive attempts to cover the drug situation by the "straight" media failed on these grounds.

That, anything, is the weakness of The Heron Trail, a book composed of reprints of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Newsday (a Long Island newspaper) series on heroin. The series, which ran daily from February 1 to March 4, 1974, represents and incredible adjudication of newspaper reporting. The series, had they been written for a large metropolitan paper and had they been written for a large metropolitan newspaper, would be the cause for much more attention. The reporters and editors are wont to do when they find themselves unable to cover something that they should be covering. They fell back upon official explanations and pat theories to account for the unrest. They really didn't know how to explain (and perhaps could not have explained in terms of standard journalism) the major changes that were going on, much as anything else, accounts for the birth of the alternative press, the new journalism, and other such forms in that troubled decade.

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