

Calvin Seerveld Art: God's gift, our thank offering

Interview with Calvin Seerveld

The following transcript is taken from an ABC *Insight* radio programme, recorded and broadcast during Calvin Seerveld's visit to Australia in July 1987. Dr. Seerveld has recently retired from the position of Senior Member in Philosophical Aesthetics at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Canada.

An outstanding Christian educator and teacher, Cal Seerveld has inspired many people throughout the world to think seriously not only about the place and meaning of art in the life of the Christian but also the importance of cultivating an imaginative sense in the conduct of our everyday lives. Whilst Cal has lead many students to commit themselves to serving the Lord in their academic work, he has also encouraged and inspired many practising artists to pursue their work "as unto the Lord". Cal has written books and articles in the fields of art historiography and philosophy and has spoken to groups of academics and "ordinary believers" throughout the world. His best-known works are *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (1980) and *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (1964), which has been republished recently. He has also authored several books of meditations on the Scriptures. The occasion of Cal Seerveld's retirement was marked with the publication of a book of essays, *Pledges of Jubilee*, edited by Lambert Zuidervart and Henry Luttikhuisen (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), written by a number of his former students. We look forward to Calvin Seerveld's return to Australia, which is scheduled for 1999.

This transcript is published with the permission of the Australian Broadcasting Commission; the original broadcast has been edited slightly for its appearance in written form. The article begins with an extract from a public address given by Cal when he was in Australia.

A few years ago my family and I walked the streets of Dresden in communist-controlled East Germany and one night there we went to the theatre at proletarian prices to a performance billed as a history of German song. About twenty-five men and women actors in ordinary clothes on stage took turns singing as a group, or in changing duos or trios, German songs composed in various historical successive periods. When it was an old folk song or a round from the middle ages, actors mingled with the various balconies to turn the whole audience into a choir so that the whole theatre became briefly a folksy sing-a-long. Regularly there would be a melody with Marxist lyrics to remind us where we were. All of a sudden a woman performer stood up to the right centre on stage, grabbed firm hold from behind of an empty wooden chair, and began the song *A Mighty Fortress is our God*—sung in German with the pace and grace **note** as it was originally written—and somebody behind us started to laugh. But the actress kept going—all four stanzas, unaccompanied, and in a manly-commanding, courageous, woman's voice—riveting everybody into silence. She meant it. She finished the song with the words "even if they take away our body, possessions, honour, child and wife they can't win!" Then she sat down in the empty chair, folded her arms and looked out stonily towards the audience daring anyone to budge. After a poignant, instant stillness, an accordion began and they shifted into a workers song with a Russian Cossack dance to keep the official balance in the programme moving.

That song, sung right, had the powerful, searching, exuberant punch of joy, sorrow, tenderness and hope that comes from living in the reality of the risen Jesus Christ in history. Whereas the melody itself has bite, confrontation and exaltation, its historical pregnancy, especially in that situation, more than doubled its promise of the Kingdom to those who know there is no other Lord than Jesus Christ, and stumbled into ruin those who tried to laugh it off. Now I mentioned this incident not to mean we should only sing Luther's songs but to head off misunderstandings as I try to answer the question, "what are the arts for?" The arts are a striking gift of God entrusted to our human hands with which we work in perhaps troubled joy, so that our artistry will make the Lord happy, set things right on earth, redeem the time, build up our neighbours. When I give that answer I am not talking abstractions. It is art that testifies in the artistry that the Holy Lord rules sounds, colours, words, actions, men and women's lives. This is not wishful thinking on my part, for artistry that does please God has been afoot in many centuries of human history. If a lot of people in the world today don't know with biblical certainty what the arts are for, then we'd better tell them, or show them. But you can't show and tell that to anybody and bring a blessing if you don't have it straight yourself.

Dialogue between Calvin Seerveld and Kay McLellan:

Kay McLellan: "The kingdom of heaven", we are told is like a wedding feast, the guests turn up wearing their clothes of celebration but one guest arrives without a wedding garment and the Lord of heaven and host of the banquet turns him out. I think your book has to do with that story, do you?

Cal: Yes, that's right, when the Lord gives one talents to do art, one shouldn't throw it off as a cloak that is in tatters or something that's not worthwhile and walk through life naked. One should accept the cloak and then go in and have a good feast with all the other people who have been dredged from the hedges and the byways of life.

Kay: I'd like to jump in and talk about that wedding feast a bit more, but I'd like to start at the shallow end. In your book you wonder why we all dress alike when some of us are so religiously joyful that our clothes ought to show it. What would Christian clothes look like?

Cal: I think that Christianly-sensitive clothes would have a flash of colour. They would be quite diverse because the different personalities of the people, but it would be something that would make the passer-by or your neighbour get a jump of joy or a little surprise. In the old days a gentleman would have a little brightly coloured feather in his derby hat. I'm not saying that feather is the "Christian mark", but it has part of that allusive delight by saying this is clothing that has some kind of redemptive dimension, because it shows love for one's neighbour.

Kay: You have quite a bit to say about aesthetics at a commercial level. What's wrong with plastic furniture and the houses they raffle on the Gold Coast with tartan carpets and floral wall papers and curtains that shine?

Cal: I would say that simple, natural products—whether it's clothes or furniture—crafted well by people who have given their lifetime to it, is something that shows through also in the very kind of character that the furniture has.

Kay: The difficulties that I find is that the hand-crafted things that you are talking about

are expensive and the plastic furniture is cheap. Are you saying something about the morals of the marketplace?

Cal: Yes, that's also involved, but I would encourage home-made furniture, although I myself am rather un-handy in making things. Perhaps not a bed that is so poor that you don't get a good night's sleep, but perhaps a table made from a half a log that one had worked at and crafted oneself, so that one's own life is in it and so it would bring more restfulness and peace in one's home.

Kay: Nevertheless, I'm always disconcerted that so much cheap clothing for instance within the range of pensioners and the unemployed is ugly. The trade actually calls it 'dumb fashion'. Awful colours, shiny materials and so on. Have you often wondered why this happens?

Cal: Well, I think that it's maybe taking advantage of certain third-world labour rates which bring in cheap imports. I don't know about Australia but it happens in Canada. I think it's also true that people are often taken advantage of by those who want to make a quick buck out of those who really have no recourse to something that is more fulfilling in their life. However, cheap clothing, if it is indeed of durable material and has a well crafted colour, need not be ornate or the latest fashion to have something that is sustaining in one's life.

Kay: The market does seem to go out of its way to make cheap clothing and cheap furniture ugly.

Cal: I think that's because they have no sense that clothing for normal people, rather than for the chic fashion followers, also deserves to have something aesthetically normative about it because it's important for their life as a whole, rather than just something you put on because you want to be covered not walk down the street unclothed.

Kay: Are too many telegraph poles, billboards and factories what the poet once said they were, "dark satanic mills"?

Cal: Yes, these things depress people if they clutter one's life in such a way that things which deserve priority and simpleness (not to say naivety) are hurt. It's a curse really as I've experienced when I lived in America. The advertising just follows you, not like the hound of heaven, but like some other kind of hound.

Kay: Is taste an absolute as Plato says it was?

Cal: I would say no. I think there are various kinds of normative taste. But there is a common, anti-taste way in which people can go to work so that you don't violate the various ways that taste maybe lived and embodied. That which is really uncouth or barbaric or vulgar I think is untasteful.

Kay: You talked about swearing in this context.

Cal: I think that people show that by swearing or cursing that they are simply unable to speak well.

Kay: It has been said that 'sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never

hurt me', but you still object to swearing.

Cal: It's my understanding, from the Old Testament that words are like things you drop in a pool of water and the ripples keep going. When a teacher says to a young child, 'stupid!', it's maybe not "cursing" but it's a way to kill that child. It may not be outright murder, but it hurts and mars that child for life. To me a cursed word is something like that. I wouldn't want to be moralistic about it. But I think it's a curse. I think it's something that really hurts people.

Kay: *So what is art?*

Cal: Just because art is treated as a striking gift of God, does not make it for me more mysterious than laying brick in an even line, or having a baby. Art, we could begin by saying, is a sensible object, event or text whose creatural structure depends on human design and it's characterised by imaginative allusive finish that afford the piece or event an identity for a while. Art is a human act, with or without words, harnessed to tell a story in sight or sound imagery that asks to be understood in kind. So art is the result of trained work with materials just as in the profession of medicine or the trade of plumbing or the business of commercial fishing. Art is a product that results from someone's special, skilled, cultivation of lines made by a lead pencil, of wood, words, gestures, or tones. Instead of the doctor culturing anti-bodies or the plumber, an elbow joint to turn water, or the fisherman fixing with radar upon the wayward swimmer fish, as artists you fashion a drawing, a poem, a song or mime. The special cultivation of creaturely things—whether they be medicine, plumbing, fishing or artistry—is good for humans to do if it is a genuine thank offering to the Lord rather than an unreflected exercise in vanity. To my mind, Christians must never get caught in the age old trap of pitting culture against nature and deciding that culture will redeem us from unruly brute nature. Nor should we believe that in going back to natural life lies our salvation from the corrupting influences of civilization. For the truth is that cultivation of creation—culture—is native to human nature; it's natural. But since the historical fall of Adam and Eve, neither human nature or human culture is itself normative which creatures like anti-bodies water fish and the line that the sun makes across the firmament are praising God despite their groaning. Our inescapable human cultivating of non-human creatures must not ruin their praise. Artists, just like doctors, plumbers and fisherman, are called to develop exponentially the praise of God's non-human servants, as well as our own human gifts.

So if you say no to that task, I dare say that you are not a faithful, responsive child of God on the earth. Some results of artistic activity have their own worth, their own kind of worth comparable to surgery, a repaired water main, or a catch of fish. The 1938 metaphor of Abraham Rockner "Mother and Child" unites in a happy frolic of composed paint the sexual feel of blue green water slapping the waves against your skin and the incredible joy of a woman bathing the fruit of her womb on her curved belly.

The 1978 cinematic montage of imagery by Syberberg ingeniously, relentlessly fingers out Hitler, how the old murderous beast surfaces in the gaudy, brassy consumptive western way of life and how puppets of the made in America dream, keep trying to hide the nightmare underneath.¹ The six minute story told by Pachelbel's *Canon* in 1720, discloses a possible aura and disposition bright with unhurried support of residences a feudal world

¹ Editor's note: The reference is to Hans-Jürgen Syberberg' 1978 Film, *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1978).

so delighted and unsullied by second guessing hesitations you wonder at its out reach and the worth of such painting, music and cinema, rest right there in the insides, the creeds and the questions artistically presented for us to read and hear.

Kay: What do you think our definition of 'beauty' ought to be?

Cal: I think it ought to be de-mystified to be simply the proportional harmony which is one element within what goes to make up art or what is aesthetic. I think there's been a long tradition that has treated beauty like a sacred cow, as if it's some mysterious thing. Beauty is identified with some kind of perfection and becomes an idol for many people, to believe that if something is not beautiful it cannot be art which I think is a very severe mistake. Historically, when something was introduced that was obscure or threatening or awful or awesome, it put beauty in its place. Many people believe that because so much modern art doesn't seem to be beautiful, therefore it can be normative. So I suggest, beauty is a much smaller thing than it has been taken to be in the history of art and aesthetics. So for years I looked for what beauty might mean and I could never find anything. It always ended up somehow talking about God and I think God and Jesus Christ might not necessarily be beautiful. According to Isaiah 53, Christ had a long nose and was nothing special to look. So much religious art depicting the crucifixion and many other themes aren't necessarily beautiful, but they are deeply moving art. So I would like to somehow reduce the idea that beautiful is the be all and the end all of the aesthetic world or artistic activity.

Kay: What is art for?

Cal: I think art has been given to human kind to be a special kind of vehicle in which those who are gifted as artists can discover and show others about the nuances, glories and surprises that are all around us. Whether it's in landscape or in faces of people or in certain events, art is not something that is my own to do with what I want, but rather as a gift that God gave to humankind in order to bear witness to the great things that are around us in this creation and to make that available to one's neighbour in simple, oblique surprising, allusive ways. So the biblically led Christian answer to the questions "What are the arts for?" is this: artistry, like surgery, like plumbing like fishing is a basic, God-given task which the Lord has provided in history to grace the life of every child, woman and man, in God's world. And we humans are called upon to accept such tasks gratefully as opportunities to praise the Lord, and serve our neighbour. So food, sanitation, medicine and artistic joy all belong to the bouquet of gifts God has given us human creatures, so we may shock the false dilemma as to whether art is necessarily useful or rather optional like dessert. Art is like marriage in the world. Some may need Paul's advice to remain unmarried, so as to be fully dedicated workers in God's kingdom. A few may need to go the way of Origen and misinterpret Christ's remark to castrate their lives in order to be free to follow the Lord in single-minded service. But both Paul and Jesus and the whole Bible state unequivocally that the church goes wrong if, because of a guilty conscience and a false spiritualism, it would—and it will, says 1 Timothy 4—go wrong in prohibiting marriage with a straight, pious face, and I would add, reject the arts as unredeemable. So you mean that art can be as basic a service as a cup of cold water? Unequivocally yes. Sometimes you don't need a cup of cold water or a plate of fish to regain spent strength, you don't need food at all, you need a hernia repaired.