

Mental Maps

(complete with missing parts)

N Alice Challinor

The self 's a dancer
The innermost self, its stage
Its viewers, the senses.
Sivasutra, Vasugupta
(8-9th Century, Kashmir)



Frank Heron is an artist complete with missing parts. What does this mean? In a period where trash is redefined as precious and the precious is re-formulated as trash, some artistic practices succeed in reviving our interest in art. I know this is a vague rather overblown claim in a world that desperately needs to evaluate and curate its own trash but of late this interest in art has been flagging. But when challenged, I can't really say what it is about Frank Heron, the artist who first appeared in the late 1970s and has now been collected in a new publication called 'The Critical Heron'. Is it the Big World themes, the skip along the wall of, or the deep dive into, cosmography and cosmology? Not a pretentious theme in Heron though, for have we not finally got it into our thick skulls? "Neither nakedness, nor entangled hair; nor uncleanness, nor fasting, nor sleeping on the ground, nor covering the body with ashes, nor over-squatting, can purify a man who is not pure from doubts and desires."

The Dhammapada is a chance clue; any Indian or Persian reference is a chance clue for an artist like Frank Heron out to construct and at the same time deconstruct his identity within his own artistic practice. Heron enjoys structuring doubt and drift. Here is an attractive poetics, an artistic practice desperately needing to acknowledge the peripheral in us all. To redeem, then, not the truth of myths but the translated processes in our imperfect knowledge, in our incomplete being, in our *Umbilicus Mundi!* With the next exhibition, I have a hunch that Frank Heron's work will step up a gear.

I imagine too that finance and art, so shaky, so irresponsible in the last decade or so, needs its come-uppance. For what maps did the last decades offer us? Do we need maps for this undoing when

the undoing of the past has 'undone' the maps themselves? Are we really to ask of art to slip us back into a reality, an artistic discipline we struggle with? This is unnecessary. The *axis mundi* has changed to the *imago mundi* and, whether Foucault's Pendulum allows us to crack the code of codes, whether we access computer craft or ancient dignity and myth, the work of Frank Heron looks as if he is getting it right.

The discipline of Heron's work is as mystically precise as the conceptual seduction is fascinating. Take his *Raincoat* exhibition. Cartographical, alchemical and cosmological, there is never a complete totality. Heron allows us to understand that any unachieved totality is only a trap if we step too hastily within the scheme. Heron maps his art and installations from literary ideas, identifying an artistic practice that floats. Mostly fragments and flotsam, these works invite us as all maps do to become the reader-redeemer. They encourage us to believe that the map is however not the territory. For the territory is our inner world, climbed into, where we create or dream up graphic constructions of the way we read the world, our identities.

However partial our readings of the world are, these constitute our mental maps. Reflectively, we then map back onto ourselves an image of our personal worlds. To find ourselves to remain lost: Lorca, Laing or Krishnamurti? Once through the door, over that threshold, there's no looking back. Poetry is precise about this. Each Heron piece comes to rest where the single fixed point will dislodge itself carefully, whether you - the viewer, the reader - remain static or not. Redemption is not assured.

If, I repeat, this revives an interest in artistic practice then I'm all for it. I can imagine Heron's work in The New Opera House or any President's Residence in any country in the world. Instead of the museums of established art these buildings threaten to house the sound of an *umbilicus mundi* quietly altering the perpetual *imago mundi* of the viewer's inner world, with computer and monitor - what could be more Foucauldian than this in any President's Residence; in the eccentric centre of any peripheral society?

Societies, it is said, get the buildings and art they deserve, get the artists they can identify and the discourses favoured, especially in uninspiring epochs. Why only in uninspiring eras? It is too early to say but Heron has produced so far - in all his works - something deserved and deserving of the significance of the peripheral and doubt. The strength of Heron's work is cultural doubt and ambivalence. It refuses to be identified, thereby seeks another identity. For the periphery of all artistic practice is defined by the centre of which it partakes, eccentrically. Let's hope this doubt, questioning and undoing tilts the bagatelle. Imagine artistic practice as a flipper machine, flicked onto to newer agendas, newer contents, newer constructs. Frank Heron's work then invites us to read a map of a partial truth complete with missing parts. The paradox is precision amidst this partial world. It warns us elegantly of the 'undoing' going on all around. Keep up: Computer literate! Fall back: Brain-dead!



Black-coloured water; never seeing the bottom, illusory depth or the raincoat buried under a catafalque of salt; the depth of the myths we make of ourselves? Those howling skulls, a water mirror; a salt page, a rehearsal of death and drift? Undoing and remaking the world through an unraveled electronic and cartographic image of itself, this is Heron's plagiarised and adapted umbilicus mundi. It is the next best thing to taking a rickshaw through Calcutta to the Howth Bridge and looking up at the engineering. But only after noticing the developed over-worked calf muscles of the young rickshawallah about to die in front of you from strenuous over-effort.

And the stray Persian reference returns to haunt our legitimation and identification of this artist. For Frank Heron, as for many with whom we identify with so conveniently, we recall the words of Jalaluddin Rumi from the 13th century: "I died mineral and turned plant. Died a plant to turn sentient. Died a beast to wear human clothes. So when by dying did I grow less? Again from manhood I must die, and once again released, soar through the sky. And here as well I must lose place. Everything passes. But His face."

N Alice Challinor, 2009

- i Gunner Ekelof, *Selected Poems*, Penguin, 1971, p.97.
- ii For another approach to (machine) romanticism see Kai Wartiainen's interpretation, *Living Machine I and The Return of Machine Romanticism*, Arkkitehti, Helsinki. 1/1990.
- iii Curtis.op.cit.p.10.

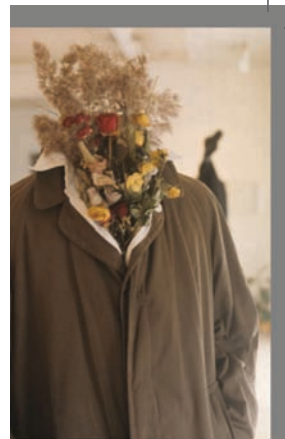


Frank Heron Biography:

FRANK HERON was born without realising it, in Rockferry, Wirral, England; he attended Rockferry Grammar School & then went on to study Anthropology at Oxford (Jesus College). Leaving England for the Baltic States in the early 1970's, Heron then taught English as a foreign language in Estonia and Finland and became a translator of Estonian and Finnish Poetry. After being awarded a scholarship by The Finnish Ministry of Education for art and and cultural study in the Theatre Academy in Warsaw, Heron began his lifelong pre-paration of lectures, seminars, reports and writings on art, architecture and culture: the first example of what became later Frank Heron's *Artscripts*.



After a stint as visiting guest lecturer in Vilnius University (Comparative Literature Department) and Jyväskylä University, Finland (Department of Art Education) Heron moved to Paris in the mid-1970s. There, living on Rue Vieille de Temple, he studied modern dance and flamenco, frequented the cafe La Tartine on Rue de Rivoli along with the group of artists that became known as the Rivalists. This led to him later creating, scripting and producing the choreographies *KALEVA*, *SHONA*, and *THE WHEEL & THE BUTTERFLY*. The latter, co-produced with Sirkka Gripenbeg, was performed in Helsinki and Tallinn by The Oxygen Rolo Dance Theatre and televised by YLE, the Finnish Broadcasting Company. Heron's life then gets murky, as it does in different periods throughout his life, as if years drop out, pass by and remain lost.



In 1983 Heron was the Keynote Speaker at The International Semiotics Congress, University of Riga where he delivered his seminal paper: *The Rhetorics of Choreographic Form*. Later in this decade he was to become Lecturer in Special Studies in Riga and in Helsinki and also led courses and workshops at The Estonian National Broadcasting Company. Though Heron specialised in Communications, Media Theory, Photography, Architecture and Advertising, it seems his special talent was moving in between these disciplines and delightfully – to go by many of his archived notes – never coming to rest in any one of them. It was during this time too that Heron began his work as a solo artist with his first exhibition *The Seven Famous Raincoats & a Moygashel* (The Cellar Gallery, Helsinki, Les Fous de l'Île Galerie, Paris, April, 1984, and Pinacotheca Fine Arts Gallery, Jyväskylä February 1985). Heron's exhibition texts were later published in *Contemporary Writing 1985* (Helsinki). *Don't Go So fast, You'll crash into Martin Wagstaff* was Heron's second exhibition at Helsinki Konsthall (1985). Heron then appears to have left the Baltics and spent five years in India as a free lance artist and designer taking up a brief role as a visiting professor at Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi in the Mass Communications Research (film, video, scriptwriting, photography, photo-journalism) in 1988. Whilst in India, Heron also taught Exhibition Art, Design and Implementation (The Trade Fair Authority of India, New Delhi) and – 1986 being a particularly productive year – designed, co-designed and produced another series of exhibitions: *Space & The Act of Space* (KHAM) Ravindra Bhavan Gallery, New Delhi IGNCA; Satish Gujral Four Decades, Ravindra Bhavan, New Delhi. In this year he also became the Visiting Special Lecturer in Design & Product Semantics and Communication Theory at The National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, India where he produced his first collaborative art exhibition and series of artscripts called *Nexus* (1987) Environmental Installations on a Traffic Roundabout, Ahmedabad, India. A workshop course in product design, interior design and architecture resulted in an urban intervention, the first of its kind in India. From a brief to participate and intervene at a traffic roundabout for an event of three days, this took on heron to co-design and produced *Shelter: a place to live, installations for Hudco*, also in Ravindra Bhavan, Delhi.

There is no trace at present, however, of Heron's activity, life and work between the years 1988 and 1994. But from the sketchy records available, it seems Heron went on to deliver the Flat Stanley Lecture at Vilnius: Museum of Contemporary Art, (Lithuania in 1994) on *Postmodernism - From Anarchy to Cultural Perspective* and was the Keynote speaker at the Kaurismäki Film Festival: (*The Cinema of the Brothers Kaurismäki*, Finland) Vilnius, Lithuania. More lectures followed and Heron was the invited speaker at the International Graphics Conference: *The Mood/Mode of Contemporary Graphics: designing for complexity*. It was also possible to trace Heron as an International Advisor for MECCA, Middle European Colony of Contemporary Arts, Terezin, Czech Republic where in fact he met up, by chance, with Will Challinor; my father. It is rumored here Heron also met Vaclav Havel but no further record exists of this entry in one his unfinished almanacs.

It was in the 1990's that Heron found himself once more in the Baltics and in Sweden where perhaps upon an introduction through my father and mother he began his collaboration with The Rocket Girls (Raketa) described herein. Heron also conducted *Critical Self* workshops from 1998 onwards at art academies around the world. An artsript called (*Zen and*) *The Art of The Fluorescent Tube* dated 1998-2000 for an art installation, in Villa Medici in Rome has been found within *The Collection of a Thousand Projects*. There is no record of whether this project was ever completed. This is all I have been able to construct so far of Frank Heron's life prior to his collaboration with The Rocket Girls and my own particular field of interest. Clearly he continued his artsripts before disappearing and his collaboration with my father Will Challinor is all the more interesting considering my father's own interest in graphic art and his own writing. In fact my father's graphic experience seems to criss-cross with Heron's as they were both involved at times on editorial work, design, layout, typography, computer graphic interfaces, marketing and distribution concerns. I am however still to research the links between Heron and my father, Will Challinor and these will form part of the next section of my research.

N Alice Challinor Stockholm 2020

N Alice Challinor Biography:

N Alice Challinor is the daughter of the writer and professor Will Challinor who spent a brief time in Stockholm at the Royal School on Skeppsholmen. Born 1995, she is now researching for her doctorate in Fine Art History specialising on the work of Frank Heron. N Alice Challinor is also known for her pioneering work in A.D.D. Art and its cognitive deceptions; she is the writer of an early book called *Super Art, Super Funding, Super Ficial* (2018, Konjak Press) and is currently working on expanding her research into the artist's documents for a definitive volume on Heron, called *The Critical Heron*. After a recent trip to Peshawar on the Afghan border, where she seems to have traced the last days of Frank Heron, her current headache however is what to do with all her father's archives and how to separate them from the work of Frank Heron. She is currently preparing the second volume in this series called *Alternative Geographies*.

N Alice Challinor has no time for hobbies or to hug Kafka.

