

THE UN-MADE

John Barbour has recently spoken of the 'un-made' and the 'un-made man' in relation to his art. They are enigmatic and suggestive phrases that apply not only to his work, but frame a broader critique of modern Western society.

So who is the 'un-made man'?

In the modern West, the un-made man is a figure come down in the world; the opposite, as Barbour puts it, of the 'self-made' man, someone undone through their own actions—the jailed, the addict, the drunk, the destitute; someone undone through the actions of others—the abused, the dispossessed, the 'disappeared'; or someone simply undone—the sick, the senile. The un-made man, to us, is repellent and abject, literally 'cast-out'—into an institution, a prison, a hospital, a home, or on to the street—the object of disgust and disdain.

Other cultures present a different model of the un-made man. According to the *Veda*, the lives of the Brahmans, the members of the highest caste of Indian society, should ideally follow a plan ending in destitution:

the life of every *Brâhmana* ... was to be divided into four stages ...; he was (1) as *Brahmacârin*, to dwell in the house of a teacher, then (2), as *Grihastha*, to fulfil the duty of founding a family, then (3) to leave it in old age, as a *Vânaprastha* (forest hermit), to give himself up more and more to increasing penances, and lastly (4), towards the end of his life, as a *Samnyâsin* ... to wander free from all earthly ties and live on alms.¹

Think also of the Buddhist and yogi striving to lose their egos; of Diogenes the Cynic, the Greek philosopher who discarded everything he owned; and of the Christian ascetic, the hermit, or Jesus Christ for that matter. While in the modern West the un-made man has come down in the world, in other traditions the un-made man is a very different being. One's un-making can be a spiritual exercise, something to aspire to—a worthy goal of a lifetime's effort.

These states of being may largely be inaccessible to the modern Western mind, but they are of interest here because they remind us that things can be very different from the way we find them in our society. They show us that the un-made man is not necessarily a bum, and that to be un-made can be a positive state of being. They also clear a mental space where we might tentatively begin to imagine how this could be realised in the West.

Barbour has such an image of the un-made man—for him the un-made man equivocates between the weakness of capitulation and the strength of stoicism: "The un-made man, bent in the shape of grief and loss, homeless in the republic of things. He'll settle for warmth, soap, hot water and a shave, for food in the belly, for sleep without fear." But this un-made man is stronger and rather more demanding than he looks, for he opposes the figure of the 'self-made' man, a figure idolised in the West, whose success and value is judged principally by his accumulation of capital and goods. Barbour's un-made man registers a zero on this scale of value, and as such stands against "all that which our globalised and corporatised world so perfectly constructs and offers up in the image of need—the endless worldly cycle of production and consumption". This un-made man has freed himself from society's 'image' of need—he recognises only what Barbour calls "ordinary, human need". It's freedom, but it's a type of freedom that the modern Westerner can barely begin to imagine.

If this positive notion of the un-made man is, for us, difficult, perhaps we can more easily appreciate the positive value of the un-made in the realm of art. Rather than a man who stands against ‘the endless worldly cycle of production and consumption’, perhaps this is a role we can first assign to an object—an ‘un-made object’.

What is the ‘un-made object’?

It won’t be a ‘made object’—the traditionally crafted (sculpted, cast, modelled, polished...) object of the fine arts, or the manufactured object of modern industry. Nor will it be a ‘ready-made object’—the object plucked by the artist from the matrix of contemporary culture and placed unaltered in the gallery. As recent use of this strategy (Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach) makes clear, the ready-made object is already a product of our globalised and corporatised world—to be ‘ready-made’ an object must first be made.

Placed within our culture, the culture of the made object, the un-made object will appear awkward, gratuitous, abject—for it pointedly fails to satisfy the standards of making we expect in art, craft, design or manufacturing. Functional design and hardiness are as anathema to the un-made object as are decoration and beauty. Although physically unimposing and vulnerable, the un-made object may excite a measure of disdain or repugnance in the viewer—perhaps this is an index of the degree to which we have internalised the values of the made object, and invested in them our sense of self.

For Barbour, the un-made object enacts “a falling away from—an unpicking” of the capitalist and consumerist culture of the made object. The un-made object refuses to satisfy what our culture “offers up in the image of need”; instead, as Barbour puts it, it will “speak of ordinary human needs and fears”. It is at once a cultural critique and an affirmation of ‘ordinary human need and fear’. These last, of course, are the province of Barbour’s un-made man, and it is really his values that the un-made object affirms.

If we can penetrate beyond the ‘out-cast’ quality of the un-made object, what might it convey of this ‘need and fear’? If, within the world of the ‘made-man’ and the ‘made’ manufactured object it is hard to say and hard to think what positive value the un-made man could embody, perhaps it is slightly easier to see positive value in the un-made object. It can tell of the horrors of death, dysfunction and loneliness that are part of our experience, but which the culture of the ‘made’ elides. And it might communicate pleasures and virtues which are also foreign to this culture. These are harder to name; I’ve tried to say something of them elsewhere², here it will suffice to indicate where they might be found in Barbour’s work: there, perhaps, in the pitiful, but sensuous stains of his embroidered banners, and there again in the gentle, hopeless humour of his grim cardboard models that recall architectural models. In these moments perhaps, we begin to share the pleasures of the un-made man.

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All quotes from John Barbour are from correspondence with the author (July 2003)

1. Paul Deussen, *The System of the Vedānta*, trans. Charles Johnston, NY: Dover, 1973 (1912), pp. 16–17.

2. ‘John Barbour: A Republic of Things’, *Broadsheet*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2001; reprinted in *Blaze: Visual Art and Writing from the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia 1990–2002*, Adelaide: CACSA, 2003, pp. 168–169.