

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58969-7 - The Vocation of the Artist
Deborah J. Haynes
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PART I

Preliminary Issues

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-58969-7 - The Vocation of the Artist
Deborah J. Haynes
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The androgenous figure in Remedios Varo's 1955 *The Flutist* (Figure 2), let us say the artist, stands beside a mysterious vegetal mountain. In the crevices, and even across the top of the mountain, plants are growing. The flutist is part of and connected to the hill, yet s/he creates the structure on the left by playing the flute. Constructed of stones and fossils and based on an intricate three-dimensional technical drawing, the structure is octagonal at the top, though it is hard to tell how many sides it has at the base. Stairs ascend through the building's three levels, through three arches. High mountains recede in the distance; they seem to be volcanoes. The background is blown and blotted paint; the hillside is built up through this process, a technique that Varo and other Surrealist artists used to emphasize chance and the work and play of the unconscious. Hidden amid the blown lines are tiny scratched marks and painted plants. Colors vary: greens, golden browns, and earth tones, except for the flutist's face, which is inlaid mother-of-pearl. The gender-ambiguous flutist creates using sound. The chord becomes the cord of creation.

From the earliest Greek mysteries to the twentieth century, philosophers and artists have explored the relationship of music, sound, and form. Goethe once declared that "architecture is crystalized music."¹ It is just this notion that we see in Varo's painting. Here the vibrations created by sound are powerful enough to construct the three-tiered temple from fossils and stones. Here the artist linked the human to natural cosmological processes.

This painting is a meditation on creation. It literally demonstrates the power of the music of the spheres. Through sound, the flutist constructs an edifice. Who will live there? We can only imagine. Varo's *Flutist* illustrates the profound relationship between creativity and hope for the future. But toward what does this creative process lead? What kind of world will it be? What future will unfold?

* * * * *

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

The vocation of the artist is the reclamation of the future. What does this bold statement mean? Who is an artist? To which artists does this statement refer? Why use a seemingly old-fashioned word like “vocation” to describe what artists should be doing? What gives me the right to say what artists “should” be doing in the first place? Why the concern about the future, and why does the future need reclaiming? Such issues and questions form the ground against which I see the figure of the artist at work and play.

The problem I am setting out to explore concerns our situatedness in a largely pluralistic, postmodern, and nuclear era. This complex phrase indicates, first, that there are few shared religious and moral values, and in fact, in some quarters, no clear values at all; second, that there is no consensus within the cultural arena about what art is or should be and little attempt to articulate its purposes; and third, that the stakes in this highly ambiguous and uncertain context are high. Ecological destruction and nuclear annihilation remain distinct possibilities. In my view, our social, political, and ecological situation on the planet lends a vividness and an urgency to both the artistic and the religious spheres of culture, because it is through artistic and religious imagination that we envision the future.

Along with cultural critics such as Fredric Jameson, I bemoan the loss of the ability to imagine possible futures other than total devastation. Many people, including artists, are presently unable to envision the future at all. In the past, people talked about, and visualized, their lives extending forward into the future. Now, most of us feel as though the only future we can see is very close in time to the present. We plan for today and tomorrow, maybe next year, or two years hence. In this context, there is a genuine need for both theoretical and practical discussions about the cultural function of the artist in contemporary society. We must regain the capacity to act and to struggle, a capacity that is rooted in prophetic criticism and visionary imagination and is in many respects presently neutralized.

In particular, in this book I articulate a vocation for the artist as prophetic critic and visionary. Using a specific interpretation of these words, I bring attention to the need for artists to assess critically the relationship of the past and present to the future. Indeed, we need to reclaim the possibility of a viable future in order to create it.

“Reclamation” is a noun that suggests land-use planning or land previously used for garbage dumps. As a child, I regularly accompanied my father to a site near Kent, Washington, where we would literally dump our family waste into a huge pit. Later, the pits were replaced by

INTRODUCTION

giant containers that would be wheeled away to some distant unseen site. Later still, the city of Kent commissioned artists to help in the reclamation of the site by designing a park. Reclamation in this sense suggests a shady, grimy, disorderly, *messy* past that needs to be cleaned up. “Ecology,” “recycling,” “ecofeminism”: Such words beckon us toward the future, for we reclaim something to make use of it in the present, as that present extends forward in time.

The prefix “re” normally indicates three possibilities when attached to verbs. It means backwards or back, as in re-act. We “act back” at another person or at an event. Life is indeed a series of interwoven reactions. “Re” also means to intensify, as in re-fine. I refine the language of my ideas in order to clarify and hone their meaning – to refine, to take out the dross. Finally, “re” often means to do something again, anew. We continually re-define the questions and re-evaluate decisions that determine reflection and action.

My assertion that the vocation of the artist is the reclamation of the future carries all of these prefixal connotations or inferred meanings. To reclaim, we look back at the past, surveying it for insight into the

Figure 2. Remedios Varo, *The Flutist*, 1955



PRELIMINARY ISSUES

present. This is not a mild act, for to reclaim is also to intensify the act of claiming. We reclaim, again and again making clear the commitment to this act.

Reclamation, in this sense, is a benign, even (re)constructive act. But it also has a more sinister implication, for reclamation can also imply colonization. To reclaim in this sense is a magisterial act, an attempt to impose upon the unknown future the relative values of a particular present. The artist Lynn Randolph said to me, “You can’t reclaim what you don’t own! To try to do so is an imperialist act.”² With this language, she asserts, we would colonize the unknown, an act that has already been tested in history with perverse and horrific consequences. Can we reclaim what we have never known? Or can we reclaim what we can never really own? Of course not. But the power of the language lies in the metanoia it hopes to accomplish.

The reclamation of the future is an imaginative act. If you, the reader, imagine one future, I another, she or he still another, we begin to create the possibility of envisioning multiple futures. And this could have profound results. The very multiplicity of possible futures means that we would create nonstatic utopias – heterotopias – ever-changing fluid visions of what could be. Reclamation founded on such ground, if it can be called ground at all, can never colonize, for it is open to change and imaginative transformation at every point. Furthermore, attempts to imagine and reclaim the future must always be grounded in the awareness that history has not been, and will not be, a linear process. As Wittgenstein put it, “When we think of the world’s future, we always mean the destination it will reach if it keeps going in the direction we can see it going in now; it does not occur to us that its path is not a straight line but a curve, constantly changing direction.”³

The reclamation of the future implies critique of, subversion of, and strategic intervention in the present, based on what we understand as the possible consequences of that present. Yes, there is a sense in which the future is already in the present, implied, as that-which-is-not-yet-but-will-be-soon. The technoscientific future we envisioned only yesterday is upon us today.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the future is already making its claims on us. The future penetrates the present; it penetrates our very existence. The future hurtles toward us, no “slouching toward Bethlehem,” no “sailing toward Byzantium.” Slouching and sailing are slow processes, implying time to take in one’s surroundings in a leisurely way. But our technofuture in cyberspace, “manned” by cyborgs of every

INTRODUCTION

(in)conceivable variety, is constantly forcing itself into our present. This new future claims *us*, at least those of us who notice.

Nevertheless, we have largely abandoned the future. Consider water for a moment. Water tables are dropping. Water that is no longer fit for human consumption without purification flows down the drain while we wash the dishes or brush our teeth. I boil the water not only in Bombay, India, or Vladivostok, Russia, but in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Pullman, Washington. If growing populations are sure to make extraordinary demands on energy production and distribution, then potable water is and will be among the most pressing problems. This abandonment of the future through our collective refusal to face the consequences of our present acts will haunt us.

In this context, to urge the reclamation of the future seems a modest exercise. Is the future at risk? I believe that it is. Can it be reclaimed? Time will tell.

METHODOLOGY

Drawing primarily on the resources of cultural history, especially art history and theory and the study of religion, *The Vocation of the Artist* is addressed to artists, to scholars in cultural studies, and to those interested in the complex interdisciplinary dialogue of the visual arts and religion. The use of resources from art history and art theory is obvious for a project dealing with the cultural function of the artist.

Against earlier formalist art historical methods, Linda Nochlin has described three of the major challenges and revisions to art history that have been useful: the social history of art; the supplementary, revivalist, or “they-also-ran” approach; and the pluralist, or “let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom,” model.⁴ Each of these approaches, while it has merit, also is problematic. The social history of art, for instance, does not address the issue of the artistic canon itself, the so-called great artists and major movements of the history of art. It also does not question the status of history, but accepts history as a given, a foundation against which visual representations may be understood. The supplementary and pluralist approaches run the risk of another kind of distortion: failing to read the past critically or to deal with the ideological nature of the work in a particular context. In the enthusiastic attempt to include Others, much is left out. Nochlin’s own answer to these dilemmas is “thinking art history Otherly”: to use her feminism, her personal

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

vantage point of Otherness, to examine how politics and ideology are implicated in representational practices. I am also committed to such a point of view. Analogously, issues of difference and representation thoroughly inform my teaching of art theory and history.

But Nochlin's comments leave out yet another alternative open to the new art history. Art, left alone in its self-imposed ghetto, has preyed on its own past long enough. By entering into new dialogues with other disciplines, by righting the Enlightenment wrong turn whereby aesthetics was separated from science and morality, the arts and their practitioners – artists, historians, theorists, critics – may gain new and vitalizing energy. I believe that we need to develop *ethical aesthetics*, which, unlike other varieties of lofty and skeptical criticism, will be flexible and helpful, combining care with judgment.⁵ The goal of this ethical aesthetics will be to allay the sense that (to paraphrase a song by David Byrne's band, the Talking Heads) we don't know just where we're going and we don't know just where we've been. But to attempt such a synthesis of aesthetics and ethics also necessitates reexamination of complex and tangled values, philosophical constructs, and art historical dicta.

In another example, Ellen Dissanayake has tried to reclaim the arts from postmodernist dissolution with the help of a biological and evolutionary perspective – what she calls “species-centrism.”⁶ From this point of view, art and art making are normal and necessary parts of human activity in all cultures and all times. I agree with her that if, with our hypervocal and deconstructionist postmodern aspirations, we succeed in erasing and eviscerating art, we are only impoverishing ourselves.

The new art history and art theory are especially comfortable with the diverse methodologies of literary theory and psychoanalysis. Frequently, new historians and theorists invest their scholarly work with the currencies of these disciplines. But religion remains a suspicious partner, its “currency” thoroughly implicated in all kinds of patriarchal and hierarchical disasters. In academic quarters, the institutions of religion are often regarded with skepticism, if not contempt. If God is dead, as many since Nietzsche have proclaimed, then shouldn't we let “him” lie?

Art historians are willing to use the discourses of religion to explicate the past, but few find its vocabulary useful for understanding contemporary art and for explaining contemporary artistic practice. This book aims to create a new dialogue that will be accessible to scholars and practitioners in both arenas. The relationship between art and religion

INTRODUCTION

can be described as a somewhat one-sided affair. Art history and theory have largely rejected religion, whereas religion – as an academic enterprise at least – has embraced the arts.⁷ I hope a few further comments about the role of religion in the conversation will aid the reader, especially the skeptical secular reader who might resist, in understanding my use of resources from the study of religion.

In recent years numerous attempts have been made to bring religion back from its marginalized position within the academy to a more central position in both academic circles and public discourse. These efforts continue today. Scholars are working on such diverse issues as the role of theology in public policy debates; the religious issues surrounding women's reproductive health care, including abortion; liberation theology and political life in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere; religious themes in literature; and the role of faith development in psychological growth. Such projects bespeak a multifaceted attempt to bring religion into dialogue with other fields of inquiry. Not the least of these has been work in the interstice between religious studies and the visual arts.

Interdisciplinary work in the arts and religion is proceeding with theoretical, analytical, and practical goals.⁸ The theoretical focus is primarily concerned with issues such as how their visual and verbal languages are similar and how they are different, or the dilemmas of the two disciplines. The analytical focus is concerned with the use of the arts as sources and documents for both historical and contemporary analyses of faith and culture. The practical focus is concerned with the role of the arts in education, worship, and ministry. Perhaps the least attention in this new dialogue of disciplines has been given to questions of theory and method, which include the relationship of theology and the arts.

How, for instance, does *theology in the arts* – the analysis of theological content in specific paintings of Caspar David Friedrich or Vasily Kandinsky, for example – differ from *theological interpretation of the arts* – how various artistic media such as literature, music, or painting reveal religious insights, a topic that Susanne K. Langer explored in *Feeling and Form*. Of more direct interest to me, however, is the difficult-to-describe area sometimes called *theology of the arts*.

A theology of the arts delineates the role of the arts in addressing the religious and moral dimensions of culture, and it also sets forth the limits of what the arts can and cannot do for theological understanding. As a theoretical enterprise it addresses many questions: the revelatory, prophetic, and sacramental potential of the arts; how the arts aid in our understanding of religious doctrines concerning issues such as creation

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

and death, as well as post-Christian ideas and values concerning the sacred; the role of the churches and of secular institutions in supporting the arts; the religious and moral dimensions of creativity, including the development of religious aesthetics; and the vocation of the artist, which is my central concern here. Although I will not emphasize that this book may be read as one aspect of a theology of the arts, *The Vocation of the Artist* is part of this new area of inquiry.

The Romanticism of the early nineteenth century was concerned with the artist as tortured bohemian or prophetic genius. The late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century avant-garde (at least one strand of it) was concerned with the work of art, the art-for-art's-sake object that could be best analyzed using formalist vocabulary. Mid-twentieth-century and early postmodernists opened a way for the viewer/reader of the art/text. Perhaps we are now ready to reconsider the creator in the creator-object-viewer triad – not from the point of view of the biography of this exemplary human specimen (usually conceptualized as male), not as an avant-garde luminary, but as a person, a human being with a particular calling and vocation. For help in this process, I turn to the study of religion, with its theological and ethical discourses and many cultural traditions.

In the process of writing, I have encountered various subdisciplines within the study of religion. For instance, the study of prophecy and apocalypticism continues to engage scholars, some working across traditions, others working within one tradition. Still other scholars look at prophecy from the perspective of another academic discipline altogether, such as anthropology. But the reader should be clear in advance that at no point have I attempted to read, assess, and “master” all of the scholarly literature in these diverse fields of inquiry.

This is also true more generally. My methodology goes against the tide of discipline-specific inquiries by traversing the grounds of cultural studies, philosophical aesthetics, and especially, art history and the study of religion. My inquiry itself ranges from general philosophical principles to history to a polemical stance that is deeply informed by a particular assessment of the present. I have, to paraphrase Barbara Stafford, deliberately chosen breadth, without, I hope, sacrificing depth. The scope and significance of our cultural predicament necessitate such a comprehensive approach. I have tried to deal with complex material “complexly,” without reducing it to false simplicities.⁹

The Vocation of the Artist was neither conceived nor written as an explication of a particular philosopher's, writer's, historian's, or artist's point of view. As Arthur Schopenhauer once put it, thinking never