

1 The situation and tasks of the philosophy of art

Who needs a theory of art?

For almost all people in almost all cultures, either the fact (as in dance) or the product (as in painting) of some commanding performance that is both somehow significant and yet absorbing in its own right (rather than as an immediate instrument of knowledge or work) has raised strong emotions. The dramatic rhapsode Ion, in Plato's dialogue, reports that when in performance he looks "down at [the audience] from the stage above, I see them, every time, weeping, casting terrible glances, stricken with amazement at the deeds recounted."¹ Richard Wagner finds nothing less than salvation in the experience of art.

I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit and the truth of the one, indivisible Art . . . I believe that through this Art all men are saved, and therefore each may die of hunger for Her . . . I believe . . . that true disciples of high Art will be transfigured in a heavenly veil of sun-drenched fragrance and sweet sound, and united for eternity with the divine fount of all Harmony. May mine be the sentence of grace! Amen!²

Yet such commanding performances, their products, and their effects in their audiences are puzzling. They often seem to come into being, so Socrates claims, "not by skill [*techne*] but by lot divine."³ Mysteriously, poets and dancers and composers "are not in their senses" when they do their work and "reason is no longer in [them]."⁴ Whatever considerable thought is involved in making art, it

¹ Plato, *Ion*, trans. Lane Cooper, in Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton University Press, 1961), 535e, p. 221.

² Richard Wagner, "Ein Ende in Paris," *Sämtliche Schriften* 1:135, cited in Daniel K. L. Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³ *Ibid.*, 536d, p. 222. ⁴ *Ibid.*, 534a, 534b, p. 220.

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seems to be not exactly the same kind of thought that is involved in solving standard problems of trade, manufacture, or knowledge. Different audiences, moreover, respond to very different performances and works. The temple of Athena on the Acropolis, John Coltrane's *Giant Steps*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and J. M. W. Turner's *Sunrise with a Boat between Headlands* do not, on the face of it, seem to have very much to do with one another. They were produced in strikingly different media, for different audiences, in different cultural circumstances. Do they or can they or should they all matter to larger audiences in the same or similar ways? What about such further efforts as the body-performance art of Karen Finley or art student Matthew Hand's flipping and catching of a beer coaster 129 times in a row, a "human installation" intended to explore "our perceptions of success and our desire to be recognized as achievers"?⁵ What about woven baskets, video art, and sports? Is art then a matter centrally of more or less local interests and effects? Perhaps art is, as the English philosopher Stuart Hampshire once remarked, "gratuitous,"⁶ in being connected with no central problems or interests that attach to humanity as such. And yet, again, works of art – products of human performance with powerfully absorbing effects – are there in all human cultures, and some of them have seemed to some of their audiences to be as important in life as anything can be.

In response to these facts, it is natural – for a variety of reasons – to wish for a theory of art, or at least for some kind of organizing account of the nature and value of artistic performances and products. Aristotle, in one of the earliest systematic accounts of the nature and value of works of art in different media, seems to have been motivated by curiosity about his own experience. His remarks on tragic drama in the *Poetics* are presented as an account, developed by abstracting from his own experience of plays, of how the trick of engaging and moving an audience is done and of its value. He suggests that similar accounts can be developed for the other media of art. In contrast, Plato in the *Republic* seems to be motivated centrally by a combination of fear and envy of the seductive power of the arts, together with a wish

⁵ Matthew Hand's work, "part of his final studies in contemporary art" at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom, is reported in David Cohen, "Pop Art," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 47, 41 (June 22, 2001), p. A8.

⁶ Stuart Hampshire, "Logic and Appreciation," *World Review* (October 1952), reprinted in *Art and Philosophy*, ed. W. E. Kennick, 2nd edn (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 652.

to displace the narrative art of Homer in the job of orienting fourth-century BCE Greek culture. Barnett Newman's famous quip that "Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds"⁷ suggests that active artists have all too often found definitions of art in the Platonic style to be irrelevant and obtuse at best and envious and hostile at worst. It is true that some philosophers and theorists of art – perhaps preeminently Plato, in his pursuit of stability and order, both personal and cultural, above all other values – have been motivated by envy and fear of art's contingency, of the wayward creativity of artists, and of the powerful but unruly emotions that works of art can induce. Yet it is equally difficult for work in the arts simply to go "its own way," for what that way is or ought to be is desperately unclear. Artists typically find themselves sometimes wanting to say something general about the meanings and values of their works, so as to cast these works as of more than merely personal interest, thence falling themselves into theory.

One might further hope that an account of the nature and value of art would provide principles of criticism that we might use to identify, understand, and evaluate art. If we could establish that all centrally successful works of art necessarily possessed some valuable and significant defining feature *F*, then, it seems, the task of criticism and the justification of critical judgments would be clear. The critic would need only to determine the presence or absence of *F* in a given work and its status and significance would be settled. In talking about such things as significant form, artistic expressiveness, having a critical perspective on culture, or originality, critics (and artists) seem often to draw on some such conception of a defining feature of art.

Yet a dilemma troubles this hope. Either the defining feature that is proposed seems abstract and "metaphysical" (significant form; productive of the harmonious free play of the cognitive faculties; artistically expressive), so that it could, with just a bit of background elucidation, be discerned in nearly anything, or the defining feature seems clear and specific enough (sonata form in music; triangular composition in painting; the unities of time, place, and action in drama), but inflexible, parochial, and insensitive

⁷ Barnett Newman, August 23, 1952. As a speaker at the Woodstock Art Conference in Woodstock, New York, according to Barnett Newman Chronology, archived at www.philamuseum-newman.org/artist/chronology.shtml

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to the genuine varieties of art. As a result, the prospects for working criticism that is clearly guided by a settled definition of art do not seem bright. At worst, for example in Heidegger's talk of art as "the truth of beings setting itself to work,"⁸ the proposed definition seems both metaphysical and parochial, here part of Heidegger's own efforts (like Plato's in a different direction) to urge on us quite specific forms of art and life at the expense of others.

Hence theories of art seem likely not to be of immediate use in criticism. They are sometimes motivated by fear, envy, and a wish for cultural mastery. They can seem strikingly irrelevant, and even hostile, to the specific work of both artists and critics. Yet they also arise out of natural curiosity about the nature of a powerful experience, and they seem unavoidable in attempting to say anything – to oneself or to others – about the nature and value of that experience. What, then, are we really doing when we are theorizing about art?

Philosophy as articulation

Instead of thinking of the philosophy of art as issuing in a settled theory – the job of definition done once and for all – we might think of various conceptions of art as successful partial articulations of the nature, meaning, and value of a certain kind of experience. These articulations, albeit that each of them may be in one way or another one-sided, may help us to become clearer about several things that we do in making and responding to art, and they may help us to connect these artistic doings with other fundamental human interests: for example, cognitive interests, moral interests, and interests in self-display and performance. Iris Murdoch, writing about goodness in general in many domains, offers a useful characterization of how a metaphysical conception of the Good, including the Good of Art, can be, as she puts it, "deep."

Our emotions and desires are as good as their objects and are constantly being modified in relation to their objects . . . There is no unattached will as a prime source of value. There is only the working of the human spirit in the morass of existence in which it always and at every moment finds itself immersed. We live in an "intermediate" world . . . We experience the *distance* which separates us from perfection and are led to place our idea of it in a figurative sense outside the turmoil of existent being . . . The Form of the

⁸ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 36.

Good . . . may be seen as enlightening particular scenes and setting the specialized moral virtues and insights into their required particular patterns. This is how the phenomena are saved and the particulars redeemed, in this *light* . . . This is metaphysics, which sets up a picture which it then offers as an appeal to us all to see if we cannot find just this in our deepest experience. The word “deep,” or some such metaphor, will come in here as part of the essence of the appeal.⁹

As we live within the morass of existence – surrounded by and caught up in various artistic and critical practices; uncertain of the proper direction for personal and cultural development; and in all this feeling ourselves distinctively, yet variously, moved by different works that seem inchoately to intimate a fuller value that they embody only in part – we might hope at least to become clearer and more articulate about our experiences and commitments: more deep. We might hope to see the many phenomena of art “in a certain light.” Carried out in this hope, the philosophy of art will itself then be a kind of neighbor to the activity of art itself, in that it will seek (without clear end) – albeit more via abstract thought, explicit comparison, and discursive reasoning – both clarity *about* and further realization *of* our natural interest in what is good within the morass of existence.

Art as a natural social practice

In beginning to try to be articulate about what in various works of art distinctly moves us, it is important to remember that making and responding to works of art, in many media, are *social* practices. It is inconceivable that these practices are the invention of any distinct individual. Any intention on the part of an individual to make art would be empty, were there no already going practices of artistic production and response. If there are no shared criteria for artistic success, then the word *art* cannot be used objectively, as a descriptive term. If I have only myself to go on, then “whatever is going to seem right to me [to call art] is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right.’”¹⁰

In fact works of art – objects and performances singled out for special attention to their significances fused with their forms – are present in all

⁹ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 507.

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edn, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §258, p. 92e; interjection added.

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cultures (and not clearly among other animals).¹¹ Children typically delight in the activities of play, gesture, and imitation out of which artistic making emerges. Learning to recognize and make representations – to pretend, to imagine, to draw – goes together with learning to talk. Succeeding in representation, in shaping and articulating one’s experience, involves a sense of accomplishment and liberation, overcoming frustration and difficulty.

Without offering any scientific account of the material basis of their emergence, Nietzsche usefully speculates in *The Birth of Tragedy* on the motives and experiences that may have figured in some of the historically earliest distinctively artistic makings. Artistic making, Nietzsche proposes, stems from the interfusion of two tendencies. The Apollinian tendency is the tendency to delight in representations, appearances, preeminently dreams at first, *as appearances*, including “the sensation that [the dream] is *mere appearance*,”¹² something I entertain that, however intense, does not immediately threaten or touch me. I can delight in contemplating these appearances as mine. The Dionysian tendency is the tendency, affiliated with intoxication, to abandon one’s individuality so as both to reaffirm “the union between man and man” and to “celebrate . . . reconciliation” with otherwise “alienated, hostile, or subjugated” nature.¹³ These tendencies emerge at first “as artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*,”¹⁴ as people find themselves both dreaming, talking, and representing, on the one hand, and engaging in rituals (as forms of “intoxicated reality”¹⁵), on the other. When these two tendencies are somehow merged – when the Dionysian orgies are taken over by the Greeks, who in them are aware of themselves *as performing and representing* (and not simply and utterly abandoning individuality), then art exists and “the destruction of the *principium individuationis* for the first time becomes an artistic phenomenon.”¹⁶ Individually and collectively, human beings come to *represent* their

¹¹ Two recent books that emphasize the universality of artistic practices and that trace this universality to artistic behaviors’ functioning as signals of evolutionary fitness in mate attraction, while also allowing for wide ranges of creativity and historical cultural variation in artistic behaviors, are Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (Oxford University Press, 2009), and Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 37. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38. ¹⁵ *Ibid.* ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

world and experiences not simply for the sake of private fantasy, not simply for the sake of instrumental communication about immediate threats and problems, but *as* an expression of a common selfhood, “as the complement and consummation of [the] existence”¹⁷ of human subjectivity, “seducing one to a continuation of life”¹⁸ as a subject.

Whatever their accuracy in detail, Nietzsche’s speculations are surely apt in proposing the emergence of artistic making and responding as cultural rather than distinctly individual, as more or less coeval with the emergence of distinctively human culture and self-conscious subjectivity as such, as driven by deep, transpersonal needs and tendencies, and as serving a significant interest of subjectivity in its own articulate life. Their aptness is confirmed both in the presence of art in all cultures and in the ontogenetic development of children into full self-conscious subjectivity in and through play, imitation, representation, expression, and art.

Action, gesture, and expressive freedom

Both personal development and cultural development are freighted with frustration and difficulty. The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin suggested in an early essay, in a line of thought both latent in Judaeo-Christian primeval history and later developed by Freud among others, that we become distinctly aware of ourselves as subjects only through transgression. Our first awareness of our responsibility as subjects for what we do, Hölderlin proposes, appears through the experience of punishment: through coming actively to understand that one has done one thing when one could and ought to have done something else. “The origin of all our virtue occurs in evil.”¹⁹ Likewise, it is scarcely possible that we would be aware of ourselves as having and participating in culture, as opposed to mere persistent and automatic routine, were there no experiences of antagonism and negotiation over what is to be done: over how to cook or hunt or build, or how to sing, decorate the body, or form kinship relations. Any distinctly human cultural life has alternatives, antagonisms, and taboos everywhere woven through it.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Friedrich Hölderlin, “On the Law of Freedom,” in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 33–34 at p. 34.

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Suppose, then, that one finds oneself caught up in a difficult and obscure course of personal and cultural development. One might well seek full investment in a worthwhile activity of performance or making. One might seek to have the performance or product that results from this activity be one's own – concretely infused with one's particular sense of embodiment, attitude, interest, sensibility, and personal history – and yet also be meaningful to others, rather than emptily idiosyncratic. In this way, one might hope to have achieved through this activity, and in its performance or product, a widely ratifiable exemplification of the possibilities of human subjectivity and action as such, thereby establishing for oneself a more secure place as a subject amidst transgressions and antagonisms.

In different but closely related ways, both John Dewey and Theodor Adorno pose this – the achievement of the most concrete and fullest possibilities of human communicative action as such – as the task of art. For Dewey, “Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciousness, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse, and action characteristic of the live creature.”²⁰ For Adorno, art is “the image of what is beyond exchange”;²¹ that is, the genuine work of art, unlike the fungible manufactured commodity, is specifically and concretely meaningful, as the result (whether as performance or product) of the activity of discovering, through the formative exploration of materials, what can be done with paint, sound, stone, the body, words, or light.

This idea of the concrete and specifically meaningful product or performance, formed through explorative activity, makes it clear that the antithesis that is sometimes posed – is art a (physical) product or thing, or is it an (experienced) idea or meaning? – is a false one. Dewey usefully observes that “the actual work of art is what the product [whether performance or physical object] does with and in experience.”²² That is, there must be a product, whether performance or physical object or document or text, but in order to function as art this product must matter specifically and concretely within human experience. Even found art, supposing it to be successful, is experienced as the result of the selecting activity of governing intentionality, put

²⁰ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1934), p. 25.

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 83.

²² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 3.

before us in order to *be* experienced. Dewey distinguishes between the art product (the vehicle of the artistic experience) and the work of art (the vehicle as it is actually experienced), and he argues that product and work are essentially interrelated.²³ Perhaps the importance of the product-of-activity-as-experienced is what Heidegger had in mind in speaking of “the work-being of the work”²⁴ and of how “the happening of truth is at work”²⁵ in it.

Dewey goes on to note that the media in which art activity can successfully occur – in which concretely and specifically communicative artistic products can be achieved – are not fixed. “If art is the quality of an activity, we cannot divide and subdivide it. We can only follow the differentiation of the activity into different modes as it impinges on different materials and employs different media.”²⁶ Some materials and media, and some art products or vehicles (whether performances or texts or physical things) achieved through formative activity exercised in relation to materials and media, are necessary in order for there to be art. But there is no way of fixing in advance of explorative activity which materials and media can be successfully explored in which ways. There is, rather, what Dewey calls “a continuum, a spectrum”²⁷ of an inexhaustible variety of available media running roughly from the “automatic” or performance-related arts, using “the mind-body of the artist as their medium,” to the “shaping” arts, issuing in a distinctly formed physical product.²⁸ Along this rough and variable spectrum, which successes are available in which media – in basket making or whistling, in painting, in song, or in the movies – is not predictable in advance of explorative activity and aptly attentive experience. To suppose otherwise is to attempt – as Plato attempted – vainly to erect a regnant classicism to constrain the efforts of human subjects to achieve concretely and specifically meaningful actions and vehicles (performances or products) in an exemplary way.

It is useful here to compare works of art with gestures (which may themselves be both components of fine art and independent vehicles of social art). Gestures (such as attentively following a conversation, or making an unexpected gift, or brushing a crumb from someone’s shoulder) stem from intelligence addressing a problem in context. They are “saturated” with intentionality, which has both an individual aspect and a cultural background always present as part of its content. They essentially involve bodily

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 162. ²⁴ Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” p. 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60. ²⁶ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 214. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227. ²⁸ *Ibid.*

activity or doing one among a great variety of possible things in a specific way. They involve the balancing or adjustment of social relations. They carry a message or significance, but often one that it is difficult wholly to “decode” or paraphrase, involving as it does specific bodily posture and ongoing nuances of relationship. They exist, in different forms, in all cultures.

Works of art may, however, be unlike gestures in the range and depth of the claims that they exert upon our attention. Anyone unable to follow and to produce a certain range of gestures appropriate to occasions within a specific culture would be a kind of social idiot. Yet we do not have practices of formal training in social gestures, as we instead leave such matters to elders, normal family life, and the occasional etiquette book. There is no curriculum in gestures anything like the one that runs in the arts from the music lessons and art classes of young childhood into conservatories and schools of art. Some ability to participate in or to follow intelligently the activities of making and understanding art, including forms of this activity outside one’s immediate cultural context, and some interest in doing so are typically thought to be a mark of an educated person. One who lacked this ability and interest altogether would be thought to be a philistine or in some way not deep. The study and practice of painting or music or literature is thought to be a fit central occupation for some lives, whereas the study and practice of manners is a simple requirement of ordinary sociality. To be sure, these differences may not be sharp everywhere. A certain cosmopolitanism in manners may require certain forms of study, and there may be highly ritualized patterns of social gesture, such as Japanese tea ceremonies, which themselves verge on fine art. Yet broadly speaking these differences in range and depth of claim on us seem to be widely accepted. For all their importance, manners seem – it seems natural to say – in their specific patterns to be significantly relative to specific cultures.

In contrast, works of art, though they vary widely in specific form both across and within cultures, seem somehow more “objective” in the claims they make on us. *If* this is indeed so, then it must be because, as Richard Wollheim elegantly puts it, the making and understanding of art somehow involve “the realization of deep, indeed the very deepest, properties of human nature.”²⁹ It is, however, desperately difficult to say, clearly and convincingly, both what these deep properties or interests of human nature that are realized in art might be and how, specifically, different works achieve this realization.

²⁹ Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 234.