

**AR 695
CONCENTRATION PAPER**

ART IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA SOCIETY

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The two aesthetics that have long stood opposed to each other, the one that recommends a complete rejection of the real life and the one that claims to reject anything that is not real life, end up, however, by coming to agreement far from reality, in a single lie and in the suppression of art... Must we conclude that this lie is the very essence of art? I shall say instead that the attitudes I have been describing are lies only insofar as they have little relation to art. What then, is art? Nothing simple, that is certain. And it is even harder to find out amid the shouts of so many people bent on simplifying everything.

Albert Camus¹

"What then, is art?" This question Camus so eloquently addressed in a lecture given at the University of Uppsala in December 1957, underlines almost all intellectual, philosophical, and creative involvement found in and around art today. All artists, art historians, aestheticians, as well as various departments within universities, museums, galleries, and publishers, in one way or another, attempt to address this complex and sometimes paradoxical question. This inquiry, often vacillating back and forth, just in and out of reach, naggingly begs resolution. If not on a major scale, like an art historian or an philosopher, who takes years developing workable historical or philosophical theories, then on a personal level, like a painter or composer who tries to establish a critical language as a guide to evaluate the worth of individual works. An incurable need for clarity and definition surrounds art, establishing a presence that equals that of the creative act or art itself. But within the modern context other issues concerning art demand attention. One such issue centers around the

relationship between visual art and contemporary American culture; why does art play such a minor role in society today.

In any art museum with areas devoted to 20th century painting or sculpture, on any given day, out of all the people walking around, at least one person might utter something derogatory about the work exhibited. Out of all the visitors only a small percentage are openly hostile. But the majority of visitors in a museum or gallery end up engaged in a less than positive experience. In the presence of Contemporary visual art most Americans feel uncomfortable. They find great difficulty in seeing modern art as good and appropriate, difficulty over discerning a truly wonderful work of art from just another cheap American hustle. When it comes to visual art most Americans feel stupid, a feeling caused by a combination of unfamiliarity and a lack of understanding in respect to contemporary art. Common belief centers around the idea that with a little art education or extra contact with art, then Americans might feel less intimidated and more appreciative of art. But this alienation extends far deeper than a lack of knowledge or involvement. Americans feel unconnected to the visual arts, even less connection to contemporary work, such as paintings by deKooning, Rothko, Kiefer, or Davis. They lack any form of an authentic relationship with art. Contemporary visual art, in American culture commands sparse attention, holds little meaning and less interest for the majority of Americans.

Originally art and society existed together harmoniously interwoven. Theories surrounding prehistoric animal-drawings, found on the walls of caves, suggest an important relationship between the art and the people of that time. For example, during the Paleolithic Era, dating back 25,000 years, pictures of animals were painted on the walls of caves

in the Moravian Gate: "a pass between the valleys of the Moravia and the Oder Rivers, connecting the steppes of Hungary with the Northern European Plain."² Other animal-drawings were painted in caves of "the limestone-walled valley of the Vezere in south-western France."³ I. W. Cornwell, in his book *The World of Ancient Man* discusses cave drawings. Cornwell says that within these two valleys the "fauna" found in cave deposits "was rich and numerous."⁴ For the cultures of those two valleys pursuing the animals that sustained them, their source of food, shelter, and clothing that ensured survival, required a minimal amount of effort. They situated their settlements on the route the herds took during seasonal migrations.⁵ Cornwell also states that "unlike most peoples of which we know at the hunting states of culture, they had leisure from the mere business of getting a living to enjoy some speculation about their world and the animals which shared it."⁶

Cornwell continues with the idea that since the animal-drawings were found in the depths of the caves and the people lived outside, by the cave's entrance then the animal images were not "merely decorative." It seems that the act of representation was important because "the cave walls are often a veritable palimpsest of engraved lines and paint."⁷ The drawings seem inconsequential in itself, because other images, drawn later, covered some of the previous ones. "With few exceptions, the general purpose of the drawings seems to have been to ensure success in hunting."⁸ For the prehistoric people of the Moravian Gate and the Vezere Valley art played a ritualistic role in their everyday lives. Art was a vital element of these two cultures, including everyone in a ritual recreating the life sustaining act of hunting. These prehistoric cultures did not perceive art as objects, separated from society, but as life sustaining

actions, as vital to existence as the actual hunt itself. When a hunter stood on the Moravian Pass and looked at the sun, he did not see a reactor, powered by nuclear fusion, occurring some 83,000,000 miles away, with a diameter of $13.92 \times 10^2 \text{ km}$ and a mass of $2 \times 10^{33} \text{ gm}$, he saw warmth and light. He saw art in a similar way, not as line, shape, form, color, or creativity, but as a ritual confirming the relationship between man and animal; an activity just as important, just as crucial for survival as the sun itself.

For a little under 23,000 years the strong relationship between culture and art remained fairly consistent. Around 500 B.C., out of the myths and legends of ancient Greece a new picture of the world arose called philosophy. Robert Persig speaks of this in his book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*:

Early Greek philosophy represented the first conscious search for what was imperishable in the affairs of men. Up to then what was imperishable was within the domain of the Gods, the myths. But now, as a result of the growing impartiality of the Greeks to the world around them, there was increasing power of the abstraction which permitted them to regard the old Greek mythos not as revealed truth but as imaginative creations of art.⁹

The beginning interest in philosophy transformed Greek civilization and with this, the relationship between culture and art also changed.

An "Immortal Principal" was created, growing out of ancient Greek myth. Truth became supreme, "the One, truth, God...(separated) from appearance and from opinion." For the first time "the Good (art) and the True (science) were not necessarily the same."¹⁰ Socrates, a powerful

spokesman for a group of "thinkers" called Cosomoligists, supported this Immortal Principal. In Plato's *Republic, Book X*, Socrates "critiques art for being a "mere imitation," where the emphasis stressed a "knowledge of reality." Socrates believed that, "The question of art is what role it can have relative to an ideal governed by reason."¹¹ At this point Greek culture changed. Perception shifted from a meaningful view considering human interaction with the world, subjective in nature, to an objective view that separated man from nature. Greek culture stopped looking for a qualitative interpretation of existence. Instead, they looked for explanation from an objective perspective, quantitative in nature, ordered, logical, systematic, and above all "truthful." Art ceased to represent an act symbolizing connection between human beings and the world surrounding them; art became a beautiful object, an ideal.

The term aesthetic became fixed in the second half of the 18th century, originally "pertaining to the realm of the senses," it now dealt with "art and beauty."¹² For Kant "the aesthetic dimension (art) is the medium in which the senses and the intellect meet."¹³ In the Aristotelian tradition, Kant divided the mental facilities into three parts: intellect, imagination, and sensuousness.¹⁴ The key facility, imagination (judgment) mediates between the other two, intellect and sensuousness. Within this context art plays a crucial role in the organization and operation of society, unifying both reason and feeling. Since society is an extension or projection of the human mind, then art should play a crucial role in the organization and operation of society. The extension of Kant's model of the mental facilities (the human mind) illustrates art's position relative to civilization.

<u>INTELLECT</u>	<u>IMAGINATION</u>	<u>SENSUOUSNESS</u>
TRUTH	JUDGMENT	GOOD
REASON	INTERPRETATION	FEELING
TECHNOLOGY	ART	CULTURE
GROUP	ART WORLD	INDIVIDUAL

This extension signifies art's relative worth to society. Showing that feeling and reason, connected through art, are all necessary ingredients of a correctly functioning society. Diametrically opposed human creations, like art, technology, and civilization are extensions of the mind (physical manifestations of activity and perception found in the mind) and these need to exist in society, in a structural relationship analogous to the human thinking/perceiving process. Both reason and feeling are required for authentic human existence. If something doesn't possess both an intellect and sensuousness, reason and feeling, then can it be considered "human?" An air conditioner has intellect; it logically responds in a reasonable fashion, built to react intellectually to the world around it. Once a temperature exceeds a preset level it responds by blowing cold air into a room to bring the room temperature back down to the preset level. People react in a similar way when faced with heat, thirst, or hunger. A dog has feeling, it also responds to the world, but in an "felt" manner, answering with happiness, fear, hurt, etc., depending on the situation, like a human being. Now both air conditioners and dogs are not human; they lack a vital combination of intellect and sensuousness. To be human requires the ability to think and feel, both being equally important. Can a society be human if it does not exhibit a reasoned structure sensitive to feeling?

Imagination plays a key role in connecting intellect and sensuousness. Since art is the manifestation of the imagination, then it should connect individuals and society. But in reality modern society is not structured along lines analogous to Kant's structure of the human mind. For the majority of human existence art played an integral role in culture, With the development of the "rational mind" (and it's corresponding institutions) art stopped interacting with culture. Reason produced a different model that influenced society and thought:

INTELLECT
 TRUTH-REASON
 SOCIETY
IMAGINATION
 ART
SENSOUSNESS
 FEELING

The belief in the equality of reason and feeling changed. In society's effort to control the violent character of nature and of emotion the intellectual side of the human mind gained elevation above the others, becoming supreme in the hierarchical structure of thought and corresponding social development . The "Truth" and the "Good," underwent a transformation, a redefining. The "Good" became virtue and the "Truth" (technology) became virtuous, meaning: "possessing or exhibiting virtue; moral; chaste." ¹⁵ Reason became the "good" and feeling became something evil, something that required modification, something reason must control. Therefore art became secondary to reason. Investigation into the nature of existence became the search of what life is instead of what life means, not both.

Art lost a connection with society. Now, being subject to reason, art stopped functioning as a qualitative interaction between the mind and the world; art became a "beautiful object." Art became dangerous to the one, "Truth". Art deals with "irrational" mind, intuitive response to existence and experience. In the sane, systematic, logical structure of rational thought art appears insane. The need to understand, the root of both art and technology, changed into a need to explain, leaving little room for anything like a myth, a poem or a painting.

Today the combination of reason, art, and feeling is not present in contemporary life; all three do not constitute society, reason alone does. Art and feeling do not relate to reason in the same sense as the imagination and sensuousness relates to the intellect. Art and feeling are not the child and the wife to the husband (reason), but rather orphaned children to the wifeless man. When a mayor announces at a press conference that 1% of the city's budget will go to the arts, he or she really means that the money will buy a few more paintings, add additional wings to the art museum, or bring a few more Broadway shows to town. This only brings a city artworks, not art. If a mayor truly felt concerned about art he or she would try and change the very foundation of thought that creates our schools and society; he or she would have to attack the domination of reason over feeling (and anything else for that matter). Perhaps then art might find itself, once again, really present in the life of a city and culture.

Endnotes

¹Albert Camus, Resistance, Rebellion, and Death (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 263-264.

²I. W. Cornwell, The World of Ancient Man (New York: The New American Library, 1964), p. 207.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 205.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Robert M. Persig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (Toronto, New York, London: Bantam Books, 1974), p. 336.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Stephen David Ross, Art and Its Significance (New York: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 7.

¹²Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 173.

¹³Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Robert M. Persig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, p. 338.