

## **The Ethics of Art**

The ethics of art derives from a simple principle—that an artwork must be considered as analogous to a person.

A single example is enough to make this analogy vivid. Imagine that you had a child. Would you believe that the child's entire purpose was to carry your ideas, your values and all possible news about you out into the world and display them for everyone to see? Do we not all expect that each person has the right to determine their own purpose in life? The ethics of art can be nothing other than a definition of autonomous art, namely that each work exists autonomously, with the same properties as an autonomous person. To put it in more familiar terms, the terms of the aesthetics of Western Marxism, in a society in which people are instruments, a truly humane ethics has to treat people as if they had their own intrinsic value and purpose, free from all instrumentality. The artwork is an image of that freedom; its purpose must be nothing but its own. In short, against the horizon of the world as it is, the artwork must stand free of all purpose. That means all purpose.

These ideas are not new, but I believe that their underlying presupposition has not been examined closely enough. This presupposition is that an artwork is a stand in for a person, and that works must then be treated the same way that we treat people. This is the ethical basis for the aesthetics of the modernist work.

As long as artworks are kept safely apart from ordinary affairs in museums, art galleries and private homes, this theory of autonomy can be understood as a description of art's real social status. The avant-garde, as we know, protested against this separation of art and political life. Today we live in a postmodern period, meaning that the avant-garde critique of art has definitively proved its validity; and also in a post-avant-garde period, meaning that the avant-garde has failed to actually change the conditions of art and that the relative social autonomy of art survives. The social theory of autonomous art makes it clear that art is put to all sorts of purposes in the same museums, art galleries and private homes that supposedly define its autonomy, but it is too easy to jump to the

conclusion that autonomy is therefore an illusion, or an ideology. Truer is the observation that artworks are autonomous in any context to the same degree as the people who are also there. The problem is structural yes, but we are part of the structure. We may feel that society as it exists is a negation of every particle of our being, but we still believe in our own autonomy. We may dream of utopia because we see no real way out of an insane world, yet we still believe that we have some power to act. The autonomy of art is found in the same place as our own autonomy, and so I believe that the continuing validity of the modernist work is best tracked through the same micro political situations in which we are challenged to secure our own freedom on a daily basis. It is the maker who is in the dock.

To require of an artwork that it carry a message to the world, or that it provide an answer to any problem, an answer of course that the artist already possesses, is already an abusive relationship. To put it simply, the artist who forms their work to any extrinsic goal is a fascist. The ethical dilemmas of the autonomous self are acted out within the artist, who must rid him or herself of all urge to dominate. Power comes first in the relation between the artist and their work. The work must be allowed to grow and develop according to its own *immanent* laws. All criteria as well as all standards of judgment must likewise be *immanent* to the particular work. All artistic decisions that are deaf to the work's own needs are criminal acts; they not only infringe the artwork's freedom, they destroy its substance by forcing it to grow into the wrong shapes. So it is with most artworks today; they are pale shadows of their own possibilities, pathetic cripples ridden like donkeys by the ego of their own particular artist, who resembles a cruel demon who has taken possession of the soul of a child before it was strong enough to defend itself.

The oppression of the artwork is found not only in its forced compliance with an "intention," but in the positing of meaning itself. Naturally all social agents—curators, critics, dealers, collectors, viewers both professional and not—will rush to greet an artwork with their own "meanings," to understand it and place it in the hierarchy of their own needs. The relationship

between artist and work is one space where such goings-on can be held in abeyance, at least for a while.

Perhaps the strongest objection to the claim that an artwork is a being, with a certain right to autonomy, is that such a thought is truly irrational. An artwork is just an object, a manufactured thing, like any tool or any commodity. Surely I am guilty of some kind of magical thinking. But then we know from Marx's analysis of the commodity that magical thinking is the most characteristically modern of all, an insight born out by the history of modern art. But surely, all qualities of an artwork must be functions of the artist who made it? Rationalists may be right to make such a claim, but they don't see the whole picture. In this culture ruled by exchange relations, individuals are possessed of talents, which they can sell in the market. Modern art has practiced "deskilling" as a way to break with such commodification. I would prefer to speak of capacities rather than talents, and it appears that some individuals have a greater than average capacity for self alienation. They are able to look on the work of their own hands as if it were some alien thing, utterly outside of themselves. This pathology is exactly the truth of the culture that we live in and continually create, however, it is pointless and wrong to take a stand against this in the name of a genuine culture in which human beings are once more united both with their own selves and with nature. Such a total organic unity may be a beautiful dream, but it does not offer any clue as to how to deal with the situation in which we find ourselves. The better enabling concept is "possession."

In antiquity it seems that the individual identity was not as tightly put together as it is today. Erotic desire, rage, artistic talent, love, authority, jealousy, hope—all the human emotions and capacities could take violent hold of the individual without any willing on the his or her part, and even to come from outside. They were all personified as gods, and hence was born the concept of possession. The god made me do it, in fact the god actually did do it; the god guided my arrow, I was lucky to be there for the occasion. It's unnecessary to rehearse how, in more modern times, an abstract universal notion of the self has replaced all that, and how that self has also been abstracted

and personified as the god of the monotheisms. Thus the modern concept of freedom is freedom *from* possession. The individual is supposed to stand alone, separate from all else, and to take satisfaction in that autonomy. The stakes are political, and the central text is certainly the major sociological study that employed Theodor Adorno during the nineteen forties, *The Authoritarian Personality*. The goal was to understand how and why modern citizens had failed to become autonomous, why our society is made up of weak and credulous followers rather than free, self-directed individuals. In fact our world is a kind of nightmare realm riven by violent and savage collective delusions. Politics, religion, mass culture and the arts are all ruled by social conventions, which is a polite and rationalistic name for collective delusion or group mind. Organisms are porous to their environment, and human beings have a particularly complex social surrounding which continually streams through them in the form of passions, desires, hates, fantasies, obsessions, loyalties, loves, rituals, compulsions, fears, beliefs and all too many argumentative words and explanations, all of which appear as transitory states of possession. Even as I confess my own weakness in the face of the flood, I hope that the reader will perceive that I too am a rationalist, and perhaps more rational than most.

The adequate modern artist regards his or her work as “alive” in much the same way that our ancestors regarded trees or rocks or streams as alive, that is as holding some indwelling spirit with a power of volition, with whom it was possible to establish a relationship. The particular kind of primitive thinking that enables this delusion is also one very powerful way to win freedom from possession. The reward for this achievement is to live in a world that is alive, or seems to be, despite the prevailing death wish that has driven the artist to such an effort in the first place.

As the capacities of the artist grow so his or her identity shrinks, and there appears to be no limit to how small an artist can become. The process of division, of shedding capacities as they are objectivized and alienated in objects called artworks, occurs within the subjectivity of the artist. They gradually find out that they themselves are talentless, that they “have” no ideas, nothing in

particular to say or to offer to their fellow world travelers. But in a corresponding movement, the possibilities of art become infinite. All richness of meaning and expression emerges as easily as the growth of a flower or a blade of grass, and the honest contemporary artist will claim that they didn't do anything at all, that the work made itself. They were not possessed, rather they walked away and let the demonic forces run free.

The energy that produces art is compounded of love, sexual desire and imagination, in an uncalculatable mixture. Everyone has these, yet not everyone has them in such a structured relation to each other that they can invent a future, and this is what the ethics of autonomous art is for, to protect the tender emerging future and allow it to grow. As such it is perhaps the only valid ethics in modern culture. This ethic is completely *irresponsible* with respect to any extrinsic circumstances. It takes no account of human suffering, of economic disparity and injustice, of the lies that fill the public sphere, not to mention the simple demands of family and friendship. It's concern is not higher or more noble than any political or social or religious ethic that tries to address the realities of human life, nor is it selfish, narcissistic or egotistical in any way. It is only concerned with one thing, something without which all life is inconceivable, the emergent future. As such it is completely elemental and utterly modern; it marries an enlightenment concept of spiritual freedom to an ancient animism that in the West at least has always been the source of poetry.

But this ethic also presumes a complete and thoroughgoing nonidentity. The artist is not the work, not even the capacity to produce the work. The artist stands alone and faces the universe, which is utterly other. All ideas about intention, or about the unconscious, or claims for expression have got to go for this ethic to be realized. In this respect it takes perhaps the most radically progressive position toward nature, including our own nature, of any ethics today. We have learned well how knowledge of nature is a preface to its exploitation; art has become even wiser—it understands how the positing of any meaning in nature at all is an earlier stage in the same sorry process. The greatest respect that we can show to nature is to let it be, apart from us. In this age of

environmental collapse, such an ethic has a real necessity, yet I doubt that many of us are fully prepared to take it on; we are too used to thinking that the universe exists for us. Though it may be true, as Proust said, that people are more important than art, if art is to have any importance at all it must surrender its intentions and its sustaining beliefs, its pieties and its scandals, its uses and its ambitions, in a word its *ego*, to the priority of the non-human.

Intelligent readers will suspect that my ethics of art is fundamentally a defense of the modernist work. Since I am an artist, my ethic is practical, so they would be right—however, my partiality does not render it false. The nihilism of the theory, its advocacy of the negation of meaning, may indicate that it is a defense of modernist abstraction in particular. This is not the case, despite the fact that I do work with abstraction. For example, a landscape by Cézanne has a lot less “meaning” than an abstraction by Mondrian. A view of Mt. St. Victoire contains much less anecdote than does a classic Mondrian—and this fact is the cause of many problems in the interpretation of both artists. It is too easy for an abstract painting to become symbolic of something or other, but then the achievement of a genuine nonidentity of oneself and work is probably equally difficult in any mode. Yet it would be a mistake to minimize the global relevance of abstraction.

Reduction of the means of art is a test for aesthetic experience. To ask whether the emotional and cognitive experiences offered by art can survive without illusion is to suggest that they themselves may only be illusion anyway; the artist that purges illusionism from art is then also giving up his or her own illusions. Progressive reduction in art could be seen as a tool of enlightenment for artists who want to know who they are and what they really feel, and to make a space within which they could feel anything, but always in relation to the surrounding social space. The process of individuation, the way that a global, urban capitalist society produces a specific type of alienated individual, is not restricted to the West and it is occurring everywhere under conditions of social and political crisis. From Serbia to Iran to America, the modern critical consciousness shares social, discursive and cognitive space with patterns of thought that haven't changed since the

Middle Ages or before. The economy is cruel, the environment is collapsing, the bombs are dropping—all over the world intelligent people are trying to get a kind of perspective on the insanity around them that would also allow them to construct themselves in an effective way. Within every culture —Asian, African, Latin American, European—there are traditional collective patterns that give meaning to life and there are also emergent solitary ways of knowing that can only be articulated through a denial of existing meaning. The tradition of negation embodied in abstract painting is then not the exclusive possession of the West. It is rather a tool, or a kind of technology, and today the same technologies are available to everyone.

Others familiar with the debates around aesthetics and politics over the last eighty years might claim that I am providing excuses that will work well in the marketplace. But I believe that a focus on the fate of art within the market is itself an excuse to avoid the real politics of autonomy. How can we expect art's autonomy to be any greater than our own? The autonomy of art as I have described it is at least achievable within an individual work. And without the degree of respect for the other that it entails I don't see how there can be a future any different from the present in any case. As long as art, on the basis of its own right to be, refuses to provide the model.

Robert Linsley

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