

Artists, Poets and Other Thinkers

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Let me begin with a memory. A few years ago, I was involved in the Art History/Theory Foundation program that was run at the College of Fine Arts of the University of New South Wales. We had a very large intake of first-year students and no adequate lecture hall. So we moved to a near-by cinema and it soon became apparent that there was, among students and staff, a sense of occasion and excitement about the weekly event. I too enjoyed it, yet my feelings were ambivalent. There was something wrong about the circus-like ambiance of these mass-lectures. I remember standing as I now stand, on the edge of a stage, hoping to disappear behind what I had to say. My unease was not a matter of stage fright but came from the fact that it was both show time and time for thought: "thought which (in the words of Hannah Arendt) is invisible and never comes into being except through a deliberate withdrawal from appearances".¹

As one tries to think aloud before a small audience of students, it is easy to vanish in such a manner and let the idea or the work speak for itself. But as one faces a larger number of people, it is harder to concentrate on the internal consonance between one's words and one's thought. Though I do not wish to ground my argument on the antagonism long since identified by philosophy between thinking and being, or thinking and doing, I believe we still need to recognise both their separate history and the common ground between them. So even if, at long last, the hostility towards the body that runs through the history of thought is coming to an end, we still need to make the crucial distinction between theory and practice. The confusion between them is not equivalent to their synthesis and does not, as far as I can tell, imply a liberation from old taboos and fears concerning "the body".

There is no denying that most thinkers who are worth their salt are also performers. To embody one's thoughts is a necessary aspect of both research and teaching. We need to live our ideas and nothing could be less indifferent than the telling of certain stories by means of which we try to transmit our values, our knowledge and whatever insight we may have. It is indeed inadvisable to establish strict boundaries between theoretical and artistic disciplines, yet it is necessary to distinguish between their respective method and vocation.

I would be most grateful if you did not hasten to interpret this last proposition as some kind of hang-up from my French (and therefore Cartesian) education. My ambition is not to isolate a pure subject and a pure object in order to define precise, measurable and immutable truths. And my insistence at setting theory and practice apart has nothing to do with the inevitable duality between what

¹ See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind "Invisibility and withdrawal"*, a Harvest Book, N.Y. 1971, pp 76-77

people are actually doing and what people believe they are doing either. The reason why the line between theory and practice must be drawn is that the mutation of thinkers into performers, or its opposite, implies a loss of concern for the invisibility of thought which is symptomatic of a society having reduced the whole communicative process to a kind of visual happening. In the Society of the Spectacle prejudices and received-ideas of the most trivial kind are predominant.

There are other reasons why theory and practice ought to be, if not disassociated, at least understood in their complex relationship. If both the artist and the theorist do think at work, their thinking is not of the same kind. In Harold Rosenberg's words: "art is a different way of thinking" and the assimilation of the artist's performance to the demonstrable logic of an academic thesis is bound to debase them both. Creative artists do not follow theoretical recipes. So when they put a drop of theory into their practice, or the opposite, they only produce what the chemist calls an unstable emulsion. Think of an unsuccessful mayonnaise, or try to put oil in water: the atoms do not mix. It is more or less the same with theory and art. Why then, is such a mixture still forced down our throat. For reason which have nothing to do with art and much to do with the superstition of the dominant tribe. Namely: the ideology of Economic Rationalism and the principles of management that have come to define the functioning of our cultural life. My advocacy today is merely that we, performers, artists or intellectuals of whatever kind, recognise what is currently happening to our field and cease pretending about the reasons that have forced the migration of the Visual and Performing Arts into the fold of over-bureaucratized institutions.

As the Public Sphere shrinks, so does the horizon of art and there are not many places where it is still possible to base one's artistic (or intellectual) practice on the ground of its tradition and history. We know that the academic scholar too has to justify his or her existence as a public servant and waste a lot of time playing tedious political "games" in order to remain in employment. Most of us have had to compromise and accommodate procedures or rules that had been defined without the slightest regard for the specific nature of our metier. Most of us have had to hide in the different niches that pretend to shelter the arts against the constructed indifference of our times. But does the university system still possess the required independence to be a genuine heaven for artists (or intellectuals). Having lost its former privileges, it too has to justify its existence in ways that do not always allow for the kind of hospitality it claims to be giving.

To judge a work of art or a performance is to participate in its movement or in its action with a feeling of pleasure. The word "pleasure" is here understood in its Aristotelian sense of "that which increases activity". A "good" work of art or a "good" performance is before all one which defeats our indifference and rekindles our curiosity for the particular, for the actually-lived experience not just of art, but of being alive at a given moment. There undoubtedly is an aesthetic element in the work of the most adventurous scientists, but it is not on it that the judgment of

their peers is based. It is on the manner in which proof is established that certain phenomena can be repeated (in the laboratory) or understood as being identical with themselves (ie; have a conceptual existence). The trend of the Hybrid created by the exodus of the arts into a mutating Academe obfuscates the distinction between two manners of thinking that tend to be mutually exclusive. The fact that the gap between them ought to be transcended is not in doubt here, only the manner in which theory-driven art purports to “subvert” this incompatibility.

In my field, the visual arts, a number of reasons make practitioners suspicious of theorists. The most common of them is that a central function of ideas in art is to place artists under the authority of non-artists². Beside plumbing the depths of aesthetic phenomena, ideas in art have a normative function. They implicitly indicate what artists should or should not do. More dramatically, they imply what they should or should not be. It is this overseeing of the artistic task that practitioners oppose with a feeling of urgency that increases in proportion to the number of agencies involved in the rationalisation of their work increases. As one witnesses this often speechless reticence towards Academe in the studio, one is reminded of the effort by Modernist artists to emancipate themselves from more ancient patronages. For it is not so much the signified content of ideas about art which is thus rejected by the most independent makers or performers, but the social relationship implied by them. Though infrequently argued in the academic manner, this rejection amounts to a critical response by practitioners who, in the quietest hour of their night, must realise that any intellectual tutelage would turn them into ancillary workers merely illustrating other people’s beliefs or ideas.

There is also a more basic cause for the hostility felt by practicing artists towards theory: a basic conflict of interest between the few who benefit from the hegemony of Academe in the artistic field and the many who, on the contrary, must labour under it³. Such a social division of labour makes the proposition that theory-driven practice is of itself subversive or, on the side of oppressed, self-contradictory in the most obvious sense that it reproduces the old hierarchy at the bottom of which lies manual labour. Historical memories may obscure the issue, especially since at the origin of this hypertrophy of the theoretical in the creative arts, one finds the redefinition of the artist as a member of the intelligentsia. From the time of its first metamorphosis from crafts person to para-scientific experimenter, from trusted servant of the Church or the State to their most conspicuous enemy, the figure of the artist acquired its intellectual dimension by adhering to the programme of thought of the Enlightenment. I am not implying that the ongoing re-definition (or de-definition) of the artistic task has gone too far. Yet it is painfully clear that after a whole century of innovation and crisis, the

² To add insult to injury, often these non-artists are not even amateurs

³ A paradoxical aspect of this antagonism can be perceived in the fact that in most art schools, Theory is generally taught by artists and not by practitioners of theoretical knowledge such as art theorists or historians. But here again the blurring of all difference between the modus operandi of the scholar and that of the performer makes them more vulnerable to the dictates of a rationality that negates them both.

artistic activity has lost a great deal of its affirmative powers and become more timid when reasserting the prerogatives of its tradition.

Naturally the aversion of practicing artists to the condition of government employees has led a good many of them to compensate for the loss of freedom typical of their new working condition with a dream of return to the terra firma of the studio. The "back to the studio" campaign must be understood as a response to a lasting offensive against traditional values and the politics of de-skilling implemented in the name of dubious ideologies. But the propensity amongst practitioners to immerse themselves in the practical difficulty of their work may not constitute a sufficient response to the impasse of their cultural situation. As a kind of knee-jerk reaction to the conspicuous triumph of both Technism and Conceptualism⁴, such a retreat from the world also suggests that practitioners are prone to forget the obligation of integrating critical self-awareness in their activity. Because artists tend to view our technocratic society as hostile, their work often concentrates on formal relationships whilst showing definite preference for sentimental (ie; ideological) generalities. No matter how different their genre may be, a great many art practices conjure up a picture of life based on general ideas. It matters little what those ideas are, what matters is that they are nothing but ideas, emanations from a realm where no-one ever works, plays, sleeps or wakes up for that matter.

Again, one must insist that art is a different form of thinking, and one in which conception cannot precede execution. This "executory understanding" (O Mandelstam) is neither outcome based, nor a matter of theoretical knowledge only. It will never be quite at home in the University system, or in the world for that matter. What is signified by works of art cannot be the translation of a clear thought without becoming an illustration of that thought and consequently a non-thought. I do not wish to suggest that communicable thoughts about art are devoid of referential value, or more radically still that, art is an incommunicable experience. On the contrary, art is the communicative action par excellence. As Merleau Ponty explains:

If a new theory of physics can be proven, it is because calculations connect the idea or meaning of it with standards of measurement already common to all men. (But) it is not enough for a painter like Cezanne, an artist or a philosopher, to create and express an idea; they must also awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others. A successful work has the strange power to teach its own lesson.

It is rare that theoretical knowledge makes us view things for what they are, but often the experience of seeing generates knowledge. In a fascinating passage of *the Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche takes the same thought a little further: "One has

⁴ Conceptualism since Duchamp should also be envisaged as a product of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction and the triumph of Technique which, with cinema, becomes the primary (founding) subject of art practices

to learn to see, habituating the eye to repose, to patience, to letting things come to it; learning to defer judgement (...) this is the first preliminary schooling in spirituality, not to react immediately to a stimulus...". Such an apprenticeship is, in its nascent state, a process of attunement and a realisation of belonging to a kind of *natura naturans*, the creative process that defines both being and doing. To say anything worthwhile about this realisation is difficult and one of the most depressing features of art writing is precisely the silence it maintains about aesthetic problems. It is as if art could not exist as an actually lived experience, but only as a social construct to be demystified.

The poets give us a better sense of the reality of art. The words of Keats, Baudelaire, Rilke, Appolinaire, Char, Paz, Stephens or Porter bear witness to their lived experience of art. In the verbal realm, they have long since convinced me that the best art theory is actually art itself.

Poetry let us touch the impalpable and hear the tide of silence that covers a landscape devastated by insomnia. Poetic testimony reveals to us another world within this world, the other world that is this world⁵

Inasmuch as it is a matter of formulation, the task of the poet consists in finding the verbal equivalent for that realisation of presence, for that which has no name because it is not yet known as such since no word yet exists for it. The task of an art theorist is also to allow with words the establishment of a contact with art that will trigger the double experience of feeling and understanding. Only then does it become possible to speak about the integration of theory and practice. Initially, only one person is beholding the new "thing", is alone in understanding it, or more exactly, as Ortega Y Gasset put it, alone in understanding it in its new poetic name.

The poetic name is the one we employ when inwardly referring to something, when talking to ourselves in secret endophasia (inner speech). Ordinarily, however, we do not have the ability to create those secret inner names whereby we would understand ourselves with respect to things, and we would say what they authentically are to us. We suffer in our soliloquies from muteness.

The poet's role hinges upon his ability to create that inner tongue, that wondrous slang comprised only of authentic names⁶.

Such a unique parlance gives poets the means to tell us something about art that is actually connected with it. It permits them to approach the mode of thinking in which the body provides the vital information that emerge in doing. But for this to happen, Octavio Paz tells us, "language (must) cease to crawl and rise to its

⁵ Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame, Essays on Love and Eroticism*, trans Helen Lane, Harvill Press, London 1995, p3.

⁶ Jose Ortega Y Gasset, *The Origins of Philosophy*, Norton, NY 1967, p62 - 63

feet and teeters above empty spaces". What do poets say about the artistic experience? We can not tell unless we ourselves desert the field where meaning is produced along the line of ordinary speech. A leap of faith is required to believe that in its present state the University system can house such forms of communication and thinking. My conviction is that the Creative Arts need their own place to be themselves again and re-establish the vital contact with their tradition of practice and thinking. As the poet writes: "no bird has the heart to sing in a thicket of questions". (René Char)