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Lawrence Kimmel

Trinity University, lkimmel@trinity.edu

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PARADOX AND METAPHOR

--Lawrence Kimmel

I THE ONTOLOGY OF ART

We should first speak as simply as possible about art as a fundamental human activity. Only then can we hope to say something of consequence about the so-called “fine arts. In its simplest description, the reference “fine art” simply means *useless art*: “fine” marks a work as being free from utility. Art is imaginatively productive, it makes something, whether painting, poem, or *partita*. But this making has no independent utility, and its character as a work of art is such that it is neither used up nor utilized as a means to something else.

Art is movement, as movement is life. If art has a basic ontology it is surely dynamic, the logic of its being is motion—to sing, to laugh, to run, to dance, to dream... Art, as a form of life, arises from a creative impulse, a passion to make something, to express something. Greek myth and philosophy agree that *Eros* is the source if not the principle of all motion—whether compulsion or attraction, whether the drive is within seeking expression, or without seeking completion. This is hardly a revelation, nor does it, so far, distinguish art from any other human endeavor. If all motion is generated in desire, all action has its seat in the erotic: walking no less than dancing, speaking no less than singing, painting a barn no less than a canvas, pounding gravel no less than sculpting marble. Even so, the primal connection of art with motion and motion with life, however humbling, sets the question of the being of works of art into the originating passion beneath their appearance as “Fine Art”.

Art can be as many things to as many people as life and circumstances contrive. Depending on one’s perspective, character, mood, or ambition, art can and is described as

an activity variously directed—as the expression of beauty or profundity, as the encouragement of virtue and goodness, as an aspiration to and repository of truth.

Consider the interior life of a painting: painting as movement—the painter, as well as the painting. The energy of a still-life canvas is analogous to the silence out of which music comes and to which it returns, a silence against which sound leans and dances, a silence which it carves out, which is counterpoint to melody. The Arts resonate with shared activity in the following paradoxical and metaphorical ways:

As sculpture is the shaping of space,
music is a shaping of silence.
As painting is a deepening of surface and light,
poetry is a condensing of vision and sound.

The movement of desire and passion, of imagination and reflection, is physical in making as well as spiritual and intellectual in conception. The words, paint, notes and marble must come to life through and in the work of the artist. She must breathe life into the page and canvas, must draw out sound from silence, form from marble. The respondent to the work must go through a parallel process in the appropriation of the work as art.

Philosophy at its best shares an affinity with the fine arts. The midwifery which Socrates claims for his trade in ideas was echoed by Michelangelo, who once said of the raw marble under his hands that he felt a form struggling to escape its prison of stone. Chopin similarly spoke of melodies continuously sounding in his head, which seemed to have an insistent life of their own, demanding expression in his music.

We have yet to establish that there is any advantage in trying to collect the various activities/experiences of the arts into a single defining expression or focus of sensibility. The philosophical problematic which promises that art is inclusive and that everything can be understood or explained, recalls the existential point of rejecting the

comprehensive analytics of Cartesian doubt. Is it *possible* to doubt everything? The antidote to such a sweeping and abstract presumption may be found by simply trying to follow through on a single case of this prescriptive suspicion. Consider a person who doubts *everything* about a mate: where every word and gesture is believed to be a deceitful lie. What then? Life, in close contact, becomes impossible. My point is that in the philosophical proclivity for abstract generalization there is always a danger of losing the bite of reality present in the particular case. If the logical problem of Cartesian universal preclusion is solipsism and its existential consequence madness, the logic of universal inclusion in the arts is the equivalent of white noise: one cannot perform music-in-general.

We need first to investigate the depth of an individual painting, the secret, shared intimacy of a single poem, the lyric of feeling in a song. The direct simplicity of sonnet and song, for example, may provide an initial resource, along with metaphor and paradox, for a more complex understanding and general inquiry into the variable meanings of the arts as such. The creative maze and range of expression concerning the essence, nature, import and value of the work, activity, and experience of art generates ambiguity such that any general description of art must be framed in paradox. The task and benefit of art seems sometimes analogous to that of describing a rainbow to a sightless person—so that she can somehow feel what she cannot see, see in the mind's eye what otherwise has no existence for her.

Robert Browning's familiar expression suggests that this is so: the artist Fra Lippo Lippi "lends out his mind to see with". The great and good gift of the artist is to provide a different space and perspective, better eyes and ears, with which, through which, from

which to see and hear, to touch and smell the world. Anyone can do this on her own - an exercise of perceptive imagination or imaginative perception—but is beset by limiting constraints of self-interest. The artist embodies, on the other hand, in the separate space of a work, an ontic and ontopoietic difference; the work is an invitation to become “the other”, what, in the actuals and factials of the everyday world, is not possible. The artist’s work brings the moment of creative possibility to life for the respondent.

Metaphor is a conceptual bridge to the range of understanding within the arts; it gathers creative activity into coherent meaning. If there is to be a genuine philosophy of the arts, however, it must find and preserve in its own expression both paradox and passion, without which there is no movement in art, or art in life.

II. THE LOGIC OF MOVEMENT

Is it possible, and if so, profitable, to say something interesting, meaningful, and/or true about “The Arts”: about visual, plastic, aural, and literate arts—about painting, sculpture, music, poetry? Is there some common thread which links all these ordinary and extraordinary activities—some common property or characteristic of the works produced or the response elicited which calls for or even allows for a critical or systematic account?

The philosophical idea and tradition of aesthetics (from the Greek *"aisthesis"*, sensuous apprehension) suggests that art, in whatever form, comes together in the immediacy of the sensuous, in the sensuous grasp of immediacy. Understood in this way, art is an ordinary and universal activity anchored in perceptive apprehension, not a special property of particular works. We can, however, distinguish several different roots which develop into an integrity of the arts: most immediately, aesthetic *sense* (sensation,

sensitivity, sensibility ...), created *works* (*oeuvres*, studies, scores, texts, objects ...) modes and mediums of *expression* (*techne*, technique, style, genre ...).

Further, works of art, which are fashioned by imagination and made manifest in the world for apprehension by a mastery of expression, are brought together finally into a whole of sense and *meaning*, through *mythos* (story). It is not that all art is “narrative”, but that when we attend to and are moved by a work of art, as art, in whatever medium, the work becomes part of the story we are living, however enduringly or briefly. This movement in art, from perception and apprehension to comprehension and appreciation, is not an issue of empirical claim for which evidence is to be offered; rather, it frames the hermeneutic domain of the complex meanings which constitute the phenomena of art.

While a successful work of art makes a claim upon our attention and interest, it does not make a parallel claim to verity or veracity. If, for example as is common, we attribute to Sophocles' tragic drama the lesson that “Man learns through suffering”, this is not a *claim* of the drama—nor indeed of any drama. Whatever lesson is embodied in the action of a drama and the lives of its characters, it is not a claim which invites investigation or verification—certainly not independently of the drama. We find resonance with the drama in our lives, or we do not, and that is the end of it. In the language which Wittgenstein used to express the character of “non-cognitive” but meaningful language, these are things which must be made manifest not through scientific “saying”, but shamanic “showing”.

There is perhaps a paradox to be examined in any philosophical discourse—not only about the arts, but religion, science, and law. The ideal in philosophy, when discussing art, would always be to *do*, and in doing *show*, what it is one is discoursing

about. In telling and writing about the philosophical import of the cultural art of storytelling among traditional peoples, as I have most recently been doing, the talk and text itself should be a story; only it must be a story about stories—a story which somehow tells the truth about what stories are and mean in the lives of those who tell and hear them. In a philosophical inquiry concerning the art of painting, the talk or text obviously cannot be a painting. But can it be an analogue of painting—an attempt to express in verbal language (metaphor) a visual sense of perception, texture, depth? And what of philosophical writing about the nature and significance of music: can/should musical expression be approximated in the lyrical cadence of the text?

The problem is that if painting and music adequately express their nature and significance, then what is added or needed in an independent philosophical analysis? The temptation is to say that what is further required is *interpretation*, a critical perspective not available, as such, in the work itself, or to be expected in a viewing or hearing. But is this the case? In any event it does seem important to make clear what it is that philosophy can possibly say which is not already shown in the activity and work of the artist. Wittgenstein's remarks may be implicitly problematic in just this way: would it not be better to leave what can be shown, to be shown in the context and activity of art, of life itself? What is to be learned about a poem, independently of reading the poem again? What options exist to the familiar counsel which constrains explanation (“if you don't understand the poem, then read it again”), or to that counsel which dismisses inquiry altogether (“A poem does not mean, but is”)?

There are different kinds as well as different levels of understanding invited by, but not addressed within, the work of art. For example, there may be allusions to be

annotated or historical background which are not included in a poem, but which might be of interest—though arguably this is of no consequence to an understanding of the poem itself. The difference in a philosophical account, presumably, is that it is not about a particular poem or painting, but about the very idea of the poetic. If the idea of poetry is embodied in the poem itself, however, then all philosophy can do is to call attention to what is manifest in the poem. Critical philosophy then becomes a form of teaching—a proposal to think about poetry/painting/music/drama in a certain way. So conceived, philosophy elaborates a didactic aspect implicit in art, but which is not evidenced in the work itself. For some, viewing the work of art is enough: they are prompted to neither say nor bear anything further. For them to do so would take away from the simple complete experience of the art. For others, a philosophical or critical analysis is the completion of what the artwork begins.

Failing to find a parallel expression in philosophical discourse resonant with the work of art, it seems an honest if lesser alternative to make apparent the presence and complexity of the aesthetic/philosophical problem itself. In discussing literature, for example, the philosopher is understandably tempted to disclose the implicit ambiguities in a description of the project, i.e., disclosing the problem of only *talking about* what she herself might better be *doing*. A title itself sometimes expresses the ambiguities of such options—for example, the now familiar serial disjunctions “philosophy and/ of/ about/ from/ in/ ... literature”.

In discussing “the nature of art”, one should be able somehow to demonstrate rather than simply comment upon the nature of the thing. Then, however, one would have a poem, and not philosophy. Philosophy in the “ideal” sense is not a poem, but a

demonstration of the poetic—not a particular thing, but an abstract description and valuation of a whole realm of meaning. The most familiar analytic model that approximates this is made up of fragmented examples of art work intended to represent the whole to which one is referring.

A currently common practice in philosophy is to simply abandon the idea of defining or describing the *essence* of art, and to focus on particular differences: what difference does this painting make as I take notice of it now? Concrete difference aims to replace an alleged historically discredited and vacuous “essence”. Philosophical discourse on art can only attend to the differences between particular works of art, and in the process call attention to and show possible variations of interest.

A third and promising analytic option is suggested by Heidegger’s reminder of an obvious circularity in the way that thinking about art work works. What is art? Art is what artists make. And who are the artists? Those who make art. Heidegger’s circle-as-method, which at first seems an absurd hoax, calls attention to a question which is not asked in ignorance, but with interest. Philosophical analysis begins with what we already know—what art is, and who artists are—and proceeds to set out and sort out the relationships which exist in the opening space in between.

The art of philosophical inquiry is shown in the construction of a “hermeneutic circle”. Analysis generates, in the context of initial discussion, a descriptive and interpretive nexus, a group of concepts and categories that constitutes an enabling grammar of the complex phenomenon one wishes to understand. This is a familiar enough process in any conceptual investigation. The first task is not to clarify or press for closure, but to generate a domain, the horizons of which are developmental, depending on

focus and extent of interest. There is no absolute rule or measure for completion of any circle (the traditional equivalent would be that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions, no exact boundaries of definition in ordinary discourse). The ideal of an analysis of the arts would be to center within a horizon of related concepts, a rich field of comprehension whose analysis does not intend to command assent, but to enrich understanding and to invite further inquiry and examples. At a time in intellectual history which has all but forsaken the presuming authority to say what is and what is not art, the procedure I recommend is a way to not dismiss the question altogether: to mind the obvious difference between baby and bathwater.

If we must in some sense already know what it is we are asking about, why *do* we put the question at all? What is it that we don't know, or wish to find out about art, that spending more time viewing art would not answer better? Inquiry may end just here, if one is interested simply in the experience of art and not the reflective question of its nature or significance. Presumably this latter is not a question that art can either ask or answer, and the *philosophical* question which responds to this further interest is rhetorical.

III. THE WORK

'The *work's* the thing/ wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King': The movement of philosophical analysis, parallel to the movement of artistic experience, may reasonably focus on *product* as well as activity—*the work of art*, as a *thing* of a certain kind. What is the essential being and value of this *kind* of thing—a poem or a painting? Following the suggestion of Hannah Arendt, among others, the nature (not simply value) of art work seems to be that it is exclusive of utility. One might learn a great deal from

boundary questions about what is and what is not art, but that is not what we are about here. Against a claim that art is useless it is an easy matter to counter that paintings are commonly used for decoration—that a painting covers a wall, much as a rug covers a floor. But the paintings in the *Louvre* are not there because the walls of a building required decorating. The walls are made for the paintings, not the paintings for the walls. This example concerns only a paradigm of painting; if we add the question of architecture as well—hangings in the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg—a more complicated analysis would be required, for example the complementarity and resonance of the works of each kind. Michelangelo's frescoes are not used to cover the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, they rather celebrate, if not the glory of God and creation, then the glory of artistic creation. It is in this sense that (great) art is useless, even though, in the mundane sense, a painting may remain an object. To say that the thing produced as art is useless is not to say that either the work or the activity is without value—quite the reverse.

The idea of “thing” or object in art is confusing if not confuted; it suggests referential boundaries that either do not exist or which are not helpful, even where there is an object. The case is further convoluted in performing arts: which *object* is the symphony or the ballet? The score? Choreography? Production? Performance... .? Even in the case of painting, where there is clearly an object, artistic import is not limited to its boundaries. While the painting may indeed be auctioned, packed, shipped or destroyed, aesthetic interest is not exhausted by the limiting concerns of the auditor or insurance carrier. As a work of art, the object is only an occasion in which we are drawn into the interior life of the painting. A painting is very much like a letter from a beloved: I may come to hold the paper on which it is written as valuable, but in fact it is the mind and

heart, the expression and care which created the thing, which is precious. All of this suggests the merit of shifting analysis from art “*object*” to the art “*work*”. A poem or a musical piece transcends its “object”, even if it is an original script or score, and must include the reading or performance. I am not confident that we can get entirely free from the association with utility in the idea of *work* of art. The association of work and works with utility is very strong. Even Aristotle, who first makes this distinction in levels and kinds of activity, may be read in such a way that it appears he was attempting to redeem art by reference to its utility—that to satisfy Plato’s requirement of rational respectability, he argued for the therapeutic use of tragic drama.

However passionate and sensuous the apprehension of generations of viewers, a work of art endures on its own terms. The traditional notion of contemplative distance in aesthetics attests to this autonomy of the work of art. One person may respond while a hundred do not, but whether or not there is a response, the work remains unchanged as an occasion. There seem to be many ways (genres, mediums, languages) and kinds of art in which this is apparent: Michelangelo’s “*Pieta*” or “*David*”, Monet’s “*Haystacks*” or “*Nymphaeas*”, Bach’s “*Partitas*” or the “*B-Minor Mass*”, Puccini’s “*La Bohème*” or “*Madama Butterfly*”, Keats’ “*Grecian Ode*” or “*Nightingale*”; these all endure *because* they are not objects of utility or consumption. The recent history of the *Pieta* is a reminder however, that although the artwork is not used or used up in its aesthetic apprehension, it remains an object in the world and may accordingly be abused or destroyed. Whether a work’s inspiration is historical or spiritual—a crucifixion or a shepherd-boy-become-king—it calls attention *to itself as a work*. Through such work,

human imagination is regenerated again and again. Art is the creative production of a work which does not exhaust the imagination of its experience.

In asking for a definition of the nature of art, the production of a circle is inevitable; the philosophical task is to ensure that the hermeneutic scope of this circle is sufficiently inclusive and insightful to merit the effort of our journey in pursuing the question. An inquiry into the general coherence and integrity of the arts is thus in the curious situation of pursuing a useful analysis of the useless.

IV. BOUNDARIES AND COORDINATES

If we trace the movement in art from apprehension to comprehension through the participating perspective of spectator, then the initial focus for analysis is the sensuous apprehension of the respondent as moved by, or drawn into, the work of art. On the other side of the equation, however, is the activity of the producer or creator, the maker of the work with which the respondent finds resonance. From the generative standpoint of the artist, the imperative is simple: “Make something!” The work of art is the open invitation of an artist to any respondent willing to take up the creative activity of the work. Artist and audience are brought together in the movement of the work, which requires creative imagination on both sides.

Aristotle's “Poetics” was enframed by his general account of three basic forms of human intelligence: *poiesis*, *praxis*, and *theoria*. The relatively inferior form of *poiesis*, “to make”, which he called productive intelligence, does not have the practical impact and communal significance of *praxis* (political intelligence) and is, moreover, seriously flawed by the sensuous limitations and immediacy of concrete things (*physis*) in a way in which contemplative intelligence (*theoria*) is not. Following Aristotle, the history of

aesthetics moved away from *poiesis* and productivity to the contemplative distance of the spectator, in an effort to escape the bothersome and binding commonplace of activity which engages the sensuous and mundane particular. On this view, the *Venus de Milo* is redeemed as art in that it calls forth a universal ideal of sensual beauty, an expression of the feminine as such. The nature of the art's work is transcendent—one is distanced so that the erotic is overcome—the naked particular of desire becomes the universal nude of art.

The work of art itself constitutes a hermeneutic circle—from its *arche* in the artist's (composer's, sculptor's, poet's ...) imagination, to the *telos* of its appreciation in the experience of the viewer (listener, reader ...). The character of this kind of work—the poetic genius of this made thing and its resonant aesthetic reception—is such, that the work of art is of a piece: it gathers sensation and sense, intelligence and imagination, expectation and experience, into a meaningful whole. The life of the work is sustained by a creative impulse, a germ which grows into the whole of a felt resonance within the work. Wittgenstein referred to Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach as “Children of God”. Indeed, a great work of art is a message from the gods that strikes wonder into a soul attuned to it. It is Aristotle's point that wonder is the deepest form of human thought. Wonder is at the beginning with the child; sustained, it becomes the expression of genius—the seed which in different soils of diverse souls becomes the works and inspiration of the religious, the philosophical, the scientific, the artistic. Whatever additional process of critical interpretation or analysis occurs, it should be careful not to lose the sight, sound, and motion of this initial and sustaining experience.

A successful philosophical analysis should mirror the hermeneutic process which the work of art accomplishes—the work which the art does and is. In tracing the interpretive boundaries of the circle of art and philosophy, and in traversing back and forth along and across its circumference, *poiesis* and *aesthesis* are joined through the idea of *mythos*—“story”. A work of art may find resolution in any number of modes, from simple perception and celebration to complex appreciation. The hermeneutic circle, however, connects, if at all, only in some sense of story, whether melodic or thematic, expressive or dramatic, whether narrative in its substance or style, in its texture or truth. The work tells a story or it connects with a story—possible, remembered, or continuing—in the communal interfacing of our language and lives.

Although classical Greek had no word for art in the modern sense of “fine arts”, the Greek word for “art” in terms of what studied skill can organize, articulate, and teach, is *techne*. The *techne* of art in its modern re-description grounds, or perhaps only centers movement in the order of sense. As the function of *mythos*, story provides a sense of meaning without requiring a claim for its truth, so *techne* draws from a shared historical and cultural sensibility that delights in the rule of movement. Where art breaks expectation, it also confirms order, discovers an integral sense of both freedom and structure, of disruption and reassurance. The “art which conceals art” is at some level itself deliberately transparent. *Techne*, in the mode of technique, serves to focus attention on one’s own experience, and brackets the tension between the independence of the work and the interdependent workings of our own senses.

Wittgenstein, explicating the vexing question of the meaning of words, used an analogy of “family resemblance” in place of “defining essence” for a baseline

understanding, an alternative picture of semantic sense which does not require a single thread running through the whole range of “meanings” (uses) of a given word or concept. In reference to the whole of language, he further modified this picture through a metaphor of a city map-grid. This analogue may help to connect a work of art on the one hand, and the comprehensive idea of art on the other. Works of art, however diverse, share a family resemblance with each other, without having one common aspect necessary to identify them as works of art. Art, as a general idea, may be understood in the way an ancient city is mapped—not only are the grids of streets irregular, but the various civilizations which have alternately inhabited the city are layered, and a full record requires and is limited by the problematic possibilities of excavation.

We have mentioned here only minimal and classical categories of inclusion to circumscribe the conception of art: *aisthesis*, *poiesis*, and *mythos*. Other experiential references can and must be added; furthermore, I have no sense as yet of what would be adequate, much less necessary and sufficient, to a full description of the points which constitute this circle. The line of points is, as it is put in mathematical analysis, “everywhere dense”. What I am suggesting is an informal method of investigation, a way to proceed to make sense both of individual works of art and of the nature of art, and in the process, to say something meaningful about the mirroring process of philosophical analysis.

V. MOVEMENT AND MOMENT

Kierkegaard once made the remark that the secret of communication is to speak in such a way that the listener is set free. He had in mind an indirection of discourse whose focus was paradox, which he called “the passion of the thinker”. This seems to be a fair

description of great art as well. Arguably, Kierkegaard's point would include metaphor as well as paradox and would cover the ground of poetic as well as religious discourse, both of which, when genuine, are depth expressions of the human spirit.

The elemental passion of art, of movement, of life, is desire. The form which desire takes in art, the languages of the story, are variegated and endless. In John Barth's contemporary mythic gem "Night Sea Journey", for example, the root metaphor is biological life. In Hesiod's ancient classic, the *Theogony*, the gathered stories of the first Greek gods, it is myth itself that generates and carries the movement. Tragic drama characteristically takes the events of ordinary life, magnified in the sensibility of its focus, and makes of the story a pattern of inevitability: we know what is bound to happen, and the drama confirms its necessity. The forms which music takes, in and of time, generate and resolve the tension of its expression, whether in the melodic lulling of the child to sleep, or the dramatic resonance of silence which meets the ending crescendo of a great orchestral work. Serious art is arguably, implicitly, didactic, but is expressed so that its lesson comes as a revelation. Analogues abound in painting and music as well. The sense of meaning in each case depends on an expression and a recognition of patterns—themselves analogues of life—biological, social, and spiritual.

Within the long history of mythic writing there is both similarity and difference. Consider the contemporary metaphors of sense and story in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*: as "Spider Woman" tells a story, the lives of both characters and listeners are woven into a web of meaning which unites a people with its own history and culture. The depth of this possibility is reflected in the ancient mythic weaving of the three Fates of Greek myth, spinning, weaving and cutting the fragile threads of human life. Lives are lived as the

stories are told—sensitivity and destiny are a feature of the telling, of the creative activity of both teller and listener. The telling itself thus becomes part of what is told, what is lived. The integrity of art is finally realized in its convergence with the history and life of culture, through its integration of possibility and inevitability.

VI. END NOTE

The philosopher, as such, does not paint the rainbow, does not cry out in the sudden lurch of the heart that beholds a rainbow in the sky, cannot hear or share the melody which fills the quiet air after a summer storm. Nor does she *explain* the rainbow, surely a satisfied task of the physicist—no prisms serve the philosopher's trade.

Nature makes the rainbow, and we can only celebrate/copy/express/ explain it, all in service to ourselves, in a responding urgency to speak, to share. To what end is the painting? Nature has no need of it—produces its own effortlessly, endlessly, nor has it need of witness. In our passion for beauty we have only to wait for sunlight after rain. But the poem, the painting, the suite, is not the rainbow, nor its occasion.

To alter the metaphor into night, must the artist try to catch a falling star—on canvas, in print, in sound? Something like this, perhaps, knowing before, that one can only fail. Whether rainbow in the sky or ecstasy in the heart, there is a sense in which no genius or means of expression is ever enough to capture the moment of its awakening.

On another account, of course, there is no question of failure, because no thing is involved—the genesis and genius of art first and last is *expression*, not the representation of something else. “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?” If you like; but the art is not in the comparison, nor comparing a summer's day to anything else. The movement of art, the movement in art, is creative expression, not comparison, calculation, or

explanation. To say that the genius of art is possibility is to recognize that Man is *not* the measure of all things. If the corresponding and compromising paradox of art is the human inevitability of failure, it knows the passion of its aim.