

# Art, Postmodernity and Anthroposophy

By Nathaniel Williams

## Seeing our Time

On the continent of Europe, over two hundred years ago, a German left his home land and passed into another country. He traveled perpendicular to the course of the sun and saw the landscape take on new dimensions and the plant life change. He came into the old city of Rome. In European society he had become known as a poet and a writer who possessed a passionate and profound Genius. Now he had left behind his home country and traveled into a land where new qualities and wondrous sights appeared all around him. He had a sincere and deep interest in nature. He had already observed and taken in many plant forms and their various transformations in his homeland, and on his journey south he was excited by the new faces of plant life. Filled with these studies he encountered works of art during his trip, works which were inspired by the culture of ancient Greece. He was struck. He saw in them a quality that felt as harmonious and natural as the unfolding of plants, as deeply connected with the foundation of life. He looked at the art and saw a harmony that was intensified, an intensified beauty. Not only was the art natural, it made the impression of being nature's highest flower. He kept a journal and he wrote-

“This much is certain, that the artists of antiquity possessed equally with Homer a mighty knowledge of Nature, a sure conception of what lends itself to portrayal, and of how it

ought to be portrayed. Unfortunately the number of works of art of the first rank is all too small. But when we find them our only desire is to understand them in truth and approach them in peace. Supreme works of art, like the most sublime products of Nature, are created by man in conformity with true and natural Law. All that is arbitrary, all that is invented, collapses: there is Necessity, there is God.”

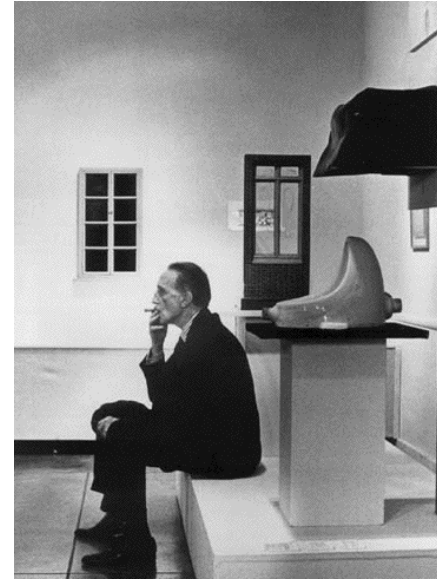
-Goethe's Diary of his “Italian Journey” under the date, 6th September, 1787.



-Juno Ludovici

This way of looking into nature, into art, is looked at as naïve and superstitious today. We even feel disbelief that such feelings *could* arise naturally, with any convincing power. We feel like it was his imagination, it was a sentimental dream which he just exaggerated to make it seem a possibility. Yet it is clear that 200 years ago in Europe, Goethe stood like a star for many of his contemporaries and many were inspired by him in their attitudes toward life and culture.

For us he is no longer a star. What we experience as significant and important today is very different. We do not see the solidity and substantiality of a creative, living nature in art. In 2004, 500 artists, curators and critics were commissioned to vote on the most influential work of modern art (The Guardian, 12/2/04). Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) "The Fountain" won out. The sculpture consists of a porcelain urinal on its side, with a false signature. Marcel Duchamp has taken the place of a star for us. Duchamp wanted to fight against the idea that art is an object connected with inspiration. No, art was what happened in the head. A toilet being placed in a new spatial position, in a new context, with a signature on it was a revelation. It revealed how art had to do with interpretation. He was not interested in the experience of beauty or the reverence which had accumulated around art and artists. He cultivated irony and indifference. The religious experience Goethe had before the art in Italy is strange next to Duchamp. If we were tempted to see Goethe's experience as authentic, suddenly it is more difficult when we look at it in the sobering light which emanates from Duchamp. Art is not a path into deeper secrets of a creative nature. Art is an institution whose foundations are built on sand.



-Duchamp at the Fountain

Our time clashes with naïve descriptions of beauty, such as we find in romanticism. It seems that the time when art and beauty were felt to be natural, rooted in reality, is gone. Then, art and nature were kin. People looked at the one and then, when turning toward the other, saw certain physiological affinities. You must be related! The blue of the majestic sky was also present in the iris of the eye, really present, and in the blue of a painted figure's cloak. It was not only due to artistic imitation of nature that this kinship was experienced. Music felt natural, through and through, even though it resembled nothing in the world, for what do Bach's auidial tapestries resemble? Even recently, when painting left behind all representation, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) could say:

Nature no longer provides the exemplary model for art to follow. And yet, even though it does follow its own path, the work of art does come to resemble nature. There is something regular and binding about the self-contained picture that grows out from within. We might think of the crystal here. The pure regularity of its geometrical structure is entirely natural, and yet surrounded by a wealth of shapeless chaos, we encounter it as something rare, adamant, brilliant.

—“The Speechless Image”, Cambridge University Press, 1986

Gadamer is not expressing a popular contemporary feeling for art. Today the very concepts “beauty” and “harmony” appear as antiquated clichés. When we look out from our modern perspective into the recent past, we are shocked. 200 years ago a positivity and idealism existed which is strange for people today. We find a cultural force alive then that people call “Romanticism”. How can one characterize that force? This force appeared in those who sensed that their very self, their thoughts and feelings, were related to the world, very closely related. The various faces and garments of the universe were not so alien, they were not totally speechless; in fact they seemed to utter a speech which resonated with the human’s most deep creative ability of expression. They felt at home in the world, interwoven within its reality. An authentic American representative of this living attitude, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), has expressed it as follows:

The soul raised above passion beholds identity and eternal causation, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself with knowing that all things go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea; long intervals of time, years, centuries are of no

account. This which I think and feel underlay every former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and what is called life and what is called death.

-Self Reliance, 1841

How has it come to be that this did not become a common attitude toward reality that survives to our day? Our suspicion is that it is romantic and not realistic. It seems naïve today to approach art with this attitude. During the age of romanticism, culture was largely a search for the beautiful and harmonious alongside the true. Today, many feel that naïve approaches to artistic processes and objects, approaches which speak of harmony and beauty, are not only unhelpful in shedding light on the nature of these things, but they are Trojan horses in the temple of the avant-garde, cultural enlightenment and creativity.

The soldiers of Troy were under siege. Their attacker’s sailed off leaving behind a large wooden horse statue. The Trojans opened the gates to their city and ended up taking the large horse back with them. After darkness fell, enemy soldiers climbed out of the sculpture and slaughtered the Trojans who were sleeping or drunk in celebration of their victory. The Trojans had taken in a majestic wooden sculpture which they thought would bring them luck and good fortune. In the night, in their sleep, the truth appeared. Many people approach cultural experiences in the same way, such as experiences of beauty, or valuable and special places or objects (art objects). They approach these experiences thinking, “Here I have something very good, something which will make my life better and bring

me many good things.” Little do they know that *most* gifts of culture are Trojan horses. Things considered wonderful, like beauty and harmony, may be harboring the worst culture imaginable: a culture of groundless dogma and hierarchical arrogance. For is it not true that different societies have developed different values, different artistic practices and a different reverence? We suspect that Goethe was seduced by an illusion. It is easy to see culture as arbitrary institution and cliché while it is difficult to *feel* that we are immune to the seductions of these institutions. We *feel* somehow connected to cultural institutions even though we think we should not. Arriving at a thorough enlightened skepticism is not a given, it is not naïve. Can we work ourselves into postmodern convictions, to the light source whose rays will clarify postmodern culture? One might sense that *only then* will true sight open up, revealing how unnecessary the traditional concepts of beauty and harmony are. Then the consequences of the postmodern aesthetic within a greater view of reality, society, and science will appear.

A characteristic of our age is that it breathes a sense of existential human vulnerability. This is double-sided: It is not only the vulnerability that the noble human is placed before a hostile world; it is also a vulnerability from within. We are permeated by a sense of our own fallibility. We feel the imminence of a moment when we will become agents of violence and illusion.

From the infinite space of the universe, majestic powers surge toward us (before the life span of a star, what is 70 years?), and from the dark spaces of the self we sense danger. What are we but dust and a vain instinct for self-preservation?

## Truth, Tyranny and Love

A dedicated philosophy and art unfolded at the beginning of the 1800's. An intense search unfolded for the lasting elements of the world (an inquiry into being). At that time, solid, enduring, omnipotent reality seemed ever so slightly concealed with a veil. One world encompassed both outer nature and the heart of the human. In the early 1900's Martin Heidegger (1889- 1976) is still wrestling with this enigma. He made a deep impression on those who came to meet him and study under him. The authenticity of his striving emanated through the unique and individual way he expressed his thought. One of his students was a Jewish man by the name of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Heidegger seemed to be carrying and tending the fire of what was valuable in middle European culture. In the 1930s he became a supporter of the Nazis. At that time, Levinas was working on a book on Heidegger's philosophical investigations. Levinas abandoned it. The war followed.

A riddle began to unfold for Levinas. It was not an intellectual dilemma. Partially through Heidegger, he was thrown into an existential experience, and this mystery and chaos began articulating itself within the unquestionable sanctuary of truth. The respect he had brought toward his teacher met the inhumanity of World War II and the Nazi's, the inconceivable murdering and suffering. Who cannot feel this existential tension? The work of Levinas grew from this tension and his dedication to Jewish Theology. Gradually, he came to criticize a certain tendency in western civilization which he traced back to ancient Greece. He came to see the enterprise of philosophy and science, of bringing order and harmony

into all existence, as an ethical dilemma. In our culture, we look at those among us who are striving for an ordered theory of everything, for totality, for an all embracing knowledge, as noble. Levinas looked at these ideals and this culture and then turned his gaze toward the field of European history. His disquiet grew. He came to articulate a critical view of the ideal of truth. Truth is the ordering of the whole world so that our thoughts and the world are one and the same. Then, there is no difference between the two. Then we can say we know. This ideal of truth is *self-sameness*. This is the wonderful transparency which finds adoration in mathematical activity. Levinas asks, "Is the single minded search for truth, for self-sameness, a seed whose necessary leaves are oppression and whose fruit is war? " If such a single minded hunter looks at people and sees their value and significance as a function of a whole, as a cog in a great harmonious machinery, as a worker, as a woman, as a Jew, what social effects does this have? For Levinas its effects would be oppression of humanity, for to him humanity is not made up of units which are individually programmed and fixed, but incomparable singular beings. He saw this uniqueness and a certain morality as rooted in human nature. He reflects on human nature, the unity of Adam, as a species of unique beings, writing:

The fact that the identity of species can include the absolutely dissimilar, a multiplicity of non additive, unique beings-- that the unity of Adam marks the individuals of incomparable uniqueness in which the common species disappears and in which the individuals cease being interchangeable like coins-- that they affirm themselves to be, each one, the sole purpose of the world (or the sole one responsible for the real): surely this is the trace of God in man, or, more precisely, the point in reality where the idea of God comes only to man.

-The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other, Stanford University Press, 1994

Levinas meditates on the process of self-forgetting, which is constantly occurring in perception when we see another and identify with their immediate need. This becomes a key that unlocks the riddle of the relationship of human beings to one another. He found this described in the basic texts of Judeo-Christian Theology. He saw in this a balancing force that could work with the philosophic impulse (the drive toward truth) in human nature, pacifying it and making it fruitful. Levinas describes the appearance of morality in the perceptive/thought experience of a face:

We have thought that the unicity and alterity of the unique is concretely the face of the other human being, of which the original epiphany lies not in the visibility of a plastic form, but in the "appresentation." The thought that is awake to the face of the other human is not a thought of..., a representation, but straight away a thought for ..., a non indifference for the other, upsetting the equilibrium of the steady and passive soul of pure knowledge, a watching over the other human in his or her unicity which is indiscernible for knowledge, an approach of the first comer in his or her proximity as neighbor and unique.

-Peace and Proximity, Indiana University Press, 1996

Levinas tries to paint the unique difference between experiencing truth and experiencing another. In truth, I experience self-sameness and rest. While, in perceiving the other I am called to constant awareness of something which refuses place, which in its total singularity demands service of me. It calls me to care for it in its vulnerability. It becomes the center; I, a satellite. It demands service by pushing back my ego and filling

the space left behind. This is how Levinas understands the commandment “Love thy neighbor as thy self”. For him it is not simply an abstract commandment which we are to act out of, rather it is a natural description of the inherent moral relationship which develops between truly singular beings. He describes how wisdom can be placed in the service of this love, which is to him the only hope that the drive to knowledge will not lead, in the end, to “War with a good Conscience.”

One cannot help thinking of the description Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) gives, where he also speaks of this relationship as the foundation for morality on earth, also using the perception of the human face to illumine the process:

Good human beings are those who are able to enter with their own souls into the soul of another. Fundamentally, all morality, all true morality, depends on this ability to enter with one’s own soul into the soul of another. Without morality it is impossible to maintain a real social configuration of humankind on earth.

Once realized, this morality leads to very significant impulses of will, which then become reality in the form of highly moral deeds. However, it begins as an impulse permeating and taking hold of the soul when we are able, for instance, to feel moved at the sight of a worried frown on another person’s face and at least our own astral body assumes the same frown.

-Truth, Beauty and Goodness, *found in Art as Spiritual Activity*,  
Anthroposophic Press 1998

Here, the uneasiness which one feels toward the drive for truth clarifies itself before our eyes. Levinas paints the impulse toward all-encompassing knowledge as a possible enemy of moral relationships. He describes that only when this impulse to know is tamed and guided by the light of the face of the other will it be freed of its poison.

Here we see a shift in the relationship between truth and human striving as it occurred in a person’s biography, which reaches over into the remnants of German idealism and then out into postmodern, contemporary life. But how does this relate to our immediate inquiry concerning the beautiful and art?

## The Politics of Art

Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) expresses thoughts similar to Levinas in his book, “The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge.” His overall approach to reality and humanity lacks the underlying religious attitude we find in the personality of Levinas. The last pages of this book are preceded by the title “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism”, and here one finds some reflections on the nature of beauty. Lyotard explains beauty by first going back to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who differentiates between the human experience of beauty and the human experience of the sublime. Lyotard describes that to create beautiful works of art (an aesthetics of beauty) is to create objects and events which correspond with thoughts that exist in our culture. These thoughts could be what beauty is, or how a thing should look, or how a work of art should be executed. When we see a painting and it corresponds with these notions, we feel rising in our hearts

what we call beauty. It is a feeling of *pleasure*. This feeling he differentiates, in agreement with Kant, from the experience of the Sublime, which is an experience containing *pain and pleasure*. The experience of the sublime occurs when a work of art makes us aware of something which cannot be represented, which lies at the threshold of the finite world. The abyss awakens in us the feeling of the sublime, a feeling of reverence and depth accompanied by an uneasiness and pain. The grandeur hurts and pleases simultaneously. For Lyotard the aesthetics of the true modern, which is for him the postmodern, is the aesthetic of the sublime. The Russian artist Kazimir Malevich painted a black square 96 years ago and placed it in the upper corner of an exhibition room, in the tradition of hanging icons. A person observing the painting finds it hung in a place usually dedicated to images of the divinity, yet one does not find the traditional human form with wings, one does not find gold, one finds the black square, a void. The window to the divine is bottomless, like infinity itself, and the unnamable inspires the sublime. Lyotard uses this picture of Malevich as an example of a sublime aesthetic. Lyotard concludes his considerations by describing the artists striving to create a schism between perception and conception as a noble avant-garde fight against tyranny. Like Levinas, he also sees the single-minded search for totality, or truth, leading to terror:

Finally it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable, which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games ..... and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We

have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.

-The Postmodern Condition, University of Minnesota Press 1984

We hear a call to the activation of difference, striving against given conceptions and sameness, in the name of a postmodern aesthetic leading away from war. For Lyotard, when we see and hear people praising “beauty” and trying to place it as the leading star of artistic practice, what they are actually doing is encouraging artists to create objects which conform with cultural prejudices and conventions. To have a nation whose artists strive to create beauty is to have a nation headed toward war. The ideal of beauty, which is given to us as an inheritance, our very instinct toward beauty, is a veiled beast.

Victor Burgin (1941-) stands as another example of a person working in these directions with art. He looks out into the cultural inheritance and its optimism, and observes:

The reservoirs of knowledge... accumulated through specialization were to bring into bloom a paradise-on-earth of rational social organizations. Eight-tenths of the way into the twentieth century, however, such optimism has been revealed as misplaced --the enlightenment vision of a rational ordering of the social did not foresee its

consequences in twentieth-century totalitarianism – Hitler, Stalin. In an important sense, then, a postmodern sociopolitical perspective is one in which the programme of the Enlightenment – the ‘Liberation of Man’ through scientific invention and ‘scientific social management’ – is seen to have at best failed, or at worst to have been the *cause* of the ills from which the twentieth century suffers.

-The End of Art Theory, Humanities Press International, 1986

Burgin sees the “aesthetic laws” of art as systems which have no inherent relationship to the laws of reality. All aesthetic theories, and theory altogether, are subjectively created systems of ideas which refer to themselves in order to “make sense.” When we vehemently defend our aesthetic beliefs (ideologies) against any attacker this illumines human nature, rather than the truth of our beliefs. The human unconsciously and uncontrollably tries to maintain the integrity of its identity. The belief structures, the identity, have no ultimate significance. Burgin follows Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) to clear this matter up by describing the development of fetishism and using it to explain our drive to create ideologies. When we look at art theory we see how the psyche confronts the world, always trying to see it as conforming with the conceptions it has created. We feel that the world is our ideology, is our self, in so far as we are experiencing our culture. Culture, which humans add to the world, is seeing in the world a world which conforms with the self. When we look at our culture we are satisfied. We might call this satisfaction beauty, for instance. Burgin recognizes this process in fetishism. He says: Look, when a little boy sees a naked little girl and asks her where her penis is, he is revealing how the way she is made up places his integrity into question.

The identity and correspondence between his self and the world is shaken. By providing a penis for the girl the abyss of difference is covered up and the human psyche can rest.

So Burgin turns to art and sees people developing aesthetic theory and trying to force it on others, and sees the same pattern of a self, out of a blind drive, striving to save the integrity of itself by oppressing the differences of others. Postmodern artistic practice is the continual battle against these inherent tendencies toward illusory wholeness which are welling up in us. This battle, eternal revolution, is *post*modern, a modern which is never present, for the moment it arrives, the task is to move on. Following this to its conclusion, we see that artists have the task of preventing the development of fanaticism and violence by constantly creating contradictions and distortions within the greater cultural norms. Burgin looks out into the world and sees a disordered chaos which the human being wants to cover with ideologies. In other words, when I feel something to be beautiful, it is only this self-satisfaction. Beauty is my own condition; it is nothing external or objective. When I understand human nature, I see that it leads me away from the world in its truth and into illusions. All theory striving for truth is oppression of reality. The true task of the artist has nothing to do with the creation of beauty.

With this Burgin saws off the branch he was sitting on. He explains that theory and thought do not lead into the nature of the world but into its oppression. Yet it is through thoughtful considerations that he develops his explanation of art theory. He does not explain how it is that his thoughts have transcended the inherent relativism of thinking and have achieved the status of objective explanatory structures, showing our nature to us,

showing us the 'real world'. Yet by taking his argument seriously we have to wonder whether we are waking up in the laws which govern human nature or a portrait of Burgin, a fetish. He sees relativity in all theory yet somehow experiences his argument as convincing.

Still, it is clear that in the eyes of modern theorists both beauty and truth have become false prophets. They once occupied a place of honor. When we look into that place we now see a battle against coherence. Naïve human nature and culture are suspect. We are scared of ourselves.

## The Void of the Genius

How interesting to hold this portrait of our time up to the self-confident thoughts of Emerson:

The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope.

"Trust thyself" every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart,

working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark.

-Self Reliance, 1841

This self confidence appears in a strange light after passing through contemporary thoughts on truth and beauty. This self-confidence could appear as a terribly insensitive and naïve blindness. Trusting the genius of the age is portrayed as an ideal, yet it could be the root of violence. The fundamental characteristic of the relationship that postmodernity has to conception is that conception leads away from reality in so far as it seeks coherence and special value apart from other experiences. Reality is inherently disjointed. All theories become equal. All hierarchy is leveled. Genius loses its purple robe. Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol (1928-1987) appear as postmodern enlightenment. What is the difference, in the end, between a realistic painting of a common soup can and an abstract painting of color fields? Each is what it is and has the most ephemeral justification. Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), a cultural commentator who has been deeply engaged in these considerations, expressed this process as he saw it in Warhol:

Warhol remains for me the founder of modernity. It is somewhat paradoxical, since modernity is usually considered more of a destruction; yet there is a certain jubilation, not at all suicidal or melancholy, because, ultimately, that's the way he is: cool, and even more than cool, totally insouciant. It's mechanical snobbism and I like that kind of provocation of

aesthetic morals. Warhol freed us from aesthetics and art... Warhol went the farthest in abolishing the subject of art, of the artist, by withdrawing from the creative act.... Andy Warhol does not belong to any avant-garde or utopia. He settles his accounts with utopia because contrary to other artists who keep comfortably deferring the idea, he enters directly into the heart of utopia, into the heart of nowhere. He identified himself with this nowhere, he was this nowhere place that is the very definition of utopia. He managed to move through the space of the avant-garde and reach the place it was striving to occupy: nowhere. But while others still relished the detour through art and aesthetics, Warhol skipped steps and completed the cycle in a single stroke.

-The Conspiracy of Art, semiotext 2005



-Warhol, Soup Can

Baudrillard points us toward this equalization of art and reality, of valued objects and everyday objects. The picture of an artist whose inspiration has existential value, of genius, is overcome, and the greatest artist of our age is Warhol, who “went the farthest in abolishing the subject of art, of the artist, by withdrawing from the creative act.” Baudrillard explains Warhol’s significance as his cultivating a continual indifference to

inspiration, a continual de-valuing of genius, “It’s mechanical snobbism and I like that kind of provocation of aesthetic morals.” Warhol achieved a great indifference to genius.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) published an essay where he describes this change in art and its relationship to genius. He sees the emphasis on understanding art through genius as fundamentally misleading. In the past, the heart of an artwork was sought in the inspiration alive within the artist. He points toward a tendency of certain modern artists, who leave the work more and more to the formal elements of their art. Whereas before the artist defined the work, today the elements receive their own life and the artist becomes a nothing, a nowhere.

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire’s work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh’s his madness, Tchaikovsky’s his vice. The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding in us’.

Though the sway of the author remains powerful (the new criticism has often done no more than consolidate it), it goes without saying that certain writers have long since attempted to loosen it. In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of

the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'. Mallarmé's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author in the interests of writing (which is, as will be seen, to restore the place of the reader).

-Image, Music, Text, *found in* The Death of the Author, Fontana Press, 1977

Barthes points to the centrality of the inspired self as a construct. It is giving way. He expresses the inspiration of the artist as inessential in the process of creation. The meaning of the work of art is always beyond the creator. The artist appears excluded from any inherent life of the work. The Artist is empty. This truth follows from the nature of language which Barthes describes.

....writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases- reason, science, law.

-Ibid.

Here we find ourselves in a cold and foreign desert. We have come to a void. Goethe's living experience of beauty has become a shadow. Truth and beauty have become enemies of an enlightened avant-garde fighting in a revolution toward the destruction of all hierarchy. Everything is leveled, all significance is equal. The artist's function has become working

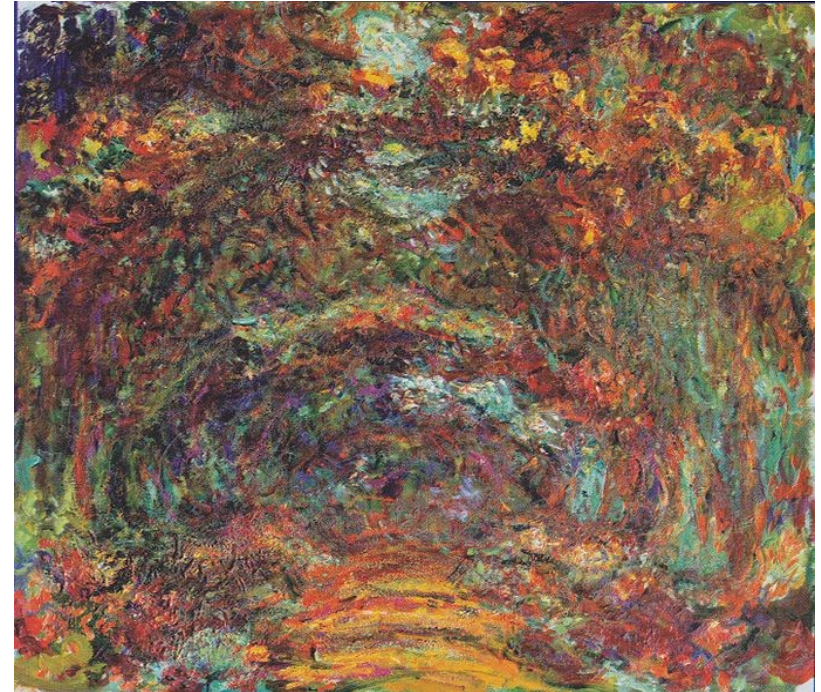
against any order and inspiration which arises. Beauty is not the ideal, fragmentation is the ideal: fragmentation in the name of peace.

## Life in the Void

Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) also writes of a self-forgetting. It would be unfair to compare his decentralization of the artist with Barthes. Barthes speaks of the formal elements of art acting and at the same time puts a wall up between the artist/genius and these elements. In the work of Deleuze the artist wakes up in a life of the elements. Barthes' descriptions are aloof, opening abyss after abyss where all holds fail; here the anti-theological power of meaninglessness appears. With Deleuze we sense something different. Deleuze also hurries away from stillness and coherence, constantly seeking movement, yet the newness he opens breathes at times, as if the void was not a vacuum but had stirrings in it, directions and specific activities. The artist hurries into infinite transformations, infinite events. He speaks of concrete aesthetic experiences and specific works of art. The artist or observer is not excluded from the heart of experience but identical with it.

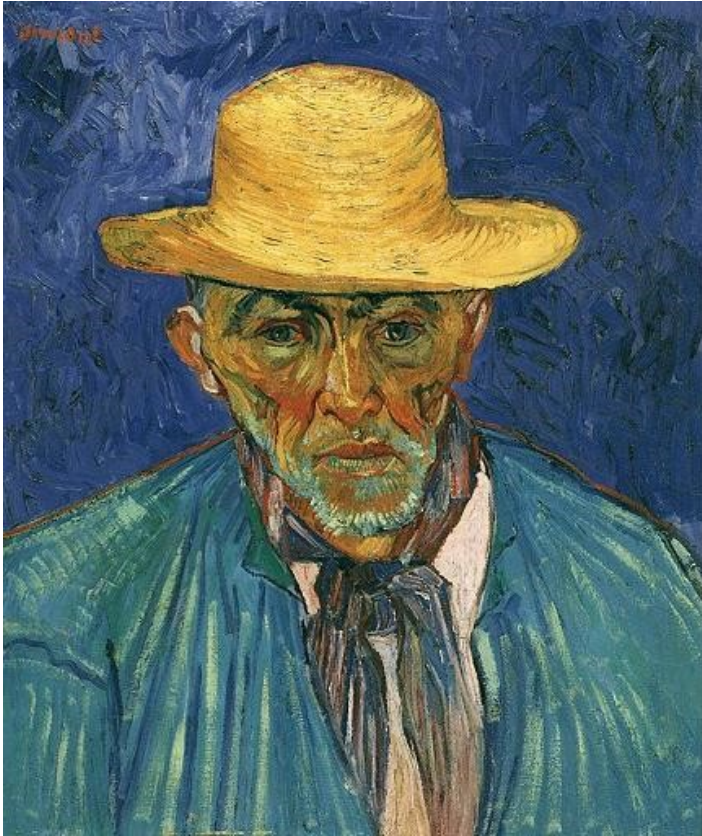
Monet's house finds itself endlessly caught up by the plant forces of an unrestrained garden, a cosmos of roses. A universe-cosmos is not flesh. Neither is its sections, joined up parts of planes, or differently oriented planes, although it may be constituted by the connection of every plane to infinity. But ultimately the universe appears as the area of plain, uniform color, the single great plane, the colored void, the monochrome infinite. The french window, as in Matisse, now opens only onto an area of plain, uniform black. The flesh, or rather the figure, is no longer the

inhabitant of the place, of the house, but of the universe that supports the house (becoming). *It is like passing from the finite to the infinite*, but also from territory to deterritorialization. It is indeed the moment of the infinite. In Van Gogh, Gauguin, or, today, Bacon, we see the surging forth, between the flows of broken tones and the infinite band of a pure, homogenous, vivid, and saturated color (“instead of painting the ordinary color of the wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest blue” -Van Gogh). It is true that the monochrome area of plain color is something other than a background. And when painting wants to start again at zero, by constructing the percept as a minimum before the void, or by bringing it closer to the maximum of the concept, it works with monochrome freed from any house or flesh. Blue in particular takes on the infinite and turns percept into “cosmic sensibility” or into that which is most conceptual or “propositional” in nature-color in the absence of man, man who has passed into color.....In short the area of plain, uniform color vibrates, clenches or cracks open because It is the bearer of glimpsed forces. And this, first of all, is what makes painting abstract: summoning forces, populating the area of plain, uniform color with the forces it bears, making the invisible forces visible in themselves, drawing up figures with geometrical appearance but that are no more than forces- forces of gravity, heaviness, rotation, the vortex, explosion, expansion, germination, and time.



-Monet, Rose Path at Giverny

Animal, plant , and molecular becomings correspond to cosmic or cosmogenetic forces: to the point that the body disappears into the plain color or becomes part of the wall or, conversely, the plain color buckles and whirls around the body's zone of indiscernibility. In short, the being of sensation is not the flesh but the compound of nonhuman forces of the cosmos.....



-Van Gogh, Portrait of a Peasant

The frame or the picture's edge is, in the first place, the external envelope of a series of frames or sections that join up by carrying out counterpoints of lines and colors, by determining compounds of sensations. But the picture is also traversed by a deframing power that opens it onto a plane of composition or an infinite field of forces.....The painter's action never stays within the frame; it leaves the frame and does not begin with it.

-What is Philosophy, Columbia University Press 1994



-Gauguin, Tahitian Landscape

In Deleuze the resistance toward the urge for coherence is present, yet this does not lead to a speechlessness. The self traverses a living world. Colors are not signs which lack living and inherent meaning. Beyond the mere sensation, they begin to emit feeling, sensibility; they move, expand and whirl. These are not presented as the ego of the subject suppressing reality but as "...color in the absence of man, man who has passed into color." The painter does not appear as someone without inspiration, rather, the nature of inspiration changes by becoming a process of living into cosmic forces that can make themselves visible through art. The tyranny of subjective inspiration which Barthes describes takes on a new face. An artist is not condemned to be excluded from the formative inspiration of the

work of art, nor is the observer condemned to a limited personality as the ultimate life of a work of art. These were the two pictures presented by Barthes. Beyond sensation, and around and within it, cosmic life is stirring. Van Gogh paints blue, which opens out into infinity. The flat plane of color opens and moves. Besides the retinal sensation, an invisible life is present, weaving, flowing, and moving. Van Gogh expresses deep satisfaction as he places the head of his friend in a painting and opens up infinity with blue behind him. For Deleuze art is abstract because the forces that form it are not sensible until they are made sensible through art. Artistic inspiration is, at least in part, a sensitivity to a more subtle universal spiritual life.

### Answers

There are songs too wide for sound. There are quiet  
places where something stopped a long time  
ago and the days began to open  
their mouths toward nothing but the sky. We live  
in place of the many who stir only  
if we listen, only because the living  
live and call out. I am ready  
as all of us are who wake at night:  
we become rooms for whatever almost  
is. It speaks in us, trying. And even if  
only by a note like this, we answer.

-W. Stafford

It seems Deleuze is trying to intensify his experience of an infinitely faceted jewel. He does not want to sacrifice the specifics for any generalizations. His action demonstrates a desire to dive immediately into life, holding nothing back. So his writing breathes the freshness and immediacy of the world and of artistic experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) has written an essay on Cézanne describing similar processes. This essay is not a product of postmodernism. It is about Cézanne and it is written by Merleau-Ponty out of the spirit of modernism. I bring it here as it has marked similarities with Deleuze's descriptions of artistic experience.

The artist leaves himself, (or is the self also world?) and finds a living motif in his surroundings. Beyond the given appearances there is life, and this life inspires the painter. The painter hears a subtle music in nature, and is trying to find the right spot where the sounds will become audible; then, in the immediacy of a meeting, a living event, a painting unfolds.

Motivating all the movements from which a picture gradually emerges there can be only one thing: the landscape in its totality and in its absolute fullness, precisely what Cézanne called a "motif." He would start by discovering the geological foundations of the landscape; then, according to Mme Cézanne, he would halt and look at everything with widened eyes, "germinating" with the countryside. The task before him was, first, to forget all he had ever learned from science and, second, *through* these sciences to recapture the structure of the landscape as an emerging organism. To do this, all the partial views one catches sight of must be welded together; all that the eye's versatility disperses must be reunited; one must, as Gasquet put it, "join the wandering hands of nature." "A minute of the world is going by which must be painted in its full reality." His meditation would suddenly be consummated: "I have a hold on my

*motif*," Cézanne would say, and he would explain that the landscape had to be tackled neither too high nor too low, caught alive in a net which would let nothing escape. Then he began to paint all parts of the painting at the same time, using patches of color to surround his original charcoal sketch of the geological skeleton. The picture took on fullness and density; it grew in structure and balance; it came to maturity all at once. "The landscape thinks itself in me," he would say, "and I am its consciousness." Nothing could be farther from naturalism than this intuitive science. Art is not imitation, nor is it something manufactured according to the wishes of instinct or good taste. It is a process of expression.

-Cézanne's Doubt, <http://faculty.uml.edu/rinnis/cezannedoubt.pdf>



-Cézanne, Mont Sainte-Victoire

## Overcoming Oppression

In postmodern thinking there is a drive toward a leveling of reality. Baudrillard expresses Warhol's bringing down of high aesthetic culture onto the same level as the so-called mundane. Lyotard points toward the battle against coherence and beauty. Burgin describes the temptation of valuing certain objects over others, or even certain conceptions, as a form of fetishism. The world is equal, yet unique. These thoughts are often explained as progressive developments toward the respect of individuality and difference.

Yet, is this leveling of all experience itself an oppression? I would never mistake the poplar tree in my yard for a pine. This has nothing to do with the words. The form of the trees, from bark to branch, leaf to sky silhouette, of each is itself and not the other. For me to say they are equal on this level of experience would be impossible. When I meet a particular friend he is distinctly different from another friend. No friend is equal to the other. When I meet certain moments in life which are empty, speechless, symbols with no feeling signification, I cannot explain it as equal to a moment where every facet of my awareness is interwoven in perceptual completion. To say the experience of beauty is equal to the experience of counting money is itself censorship of specificity. To fight for equal rights for all moments of reality is noble but only if they are allowed freedom of expression. The creating of explanations of beauty, which have no relationship to the experience of beauty, is oppression, an insensitivity. This is a conclusion which leads us to look to Baudrillard and to Warhol's attitude and suddenly to experience it as a dulling of observation and specificity, not an enlightenment but a darkening.

'Yes,' some may say, 'it is not that they are equal. We are saying they have the same right to their individuality.' If this is the case, all that is happening is that aesthetics is being re-founded in a deed of oblivious confusion. To describe the individuality of beauty and art is the task of aesthetics. Beauty warms the human heart and opens the mind to profound experiences when she speaks them. To read a poem is a specific reality.

### **Grasshopper in a Field**

Who took the young thin stems  
and bent them to be your legs,  
folded leaves like origami  
to make a pair of wings?  
I found you:  
a green ear of wheat  
mounting a stalk,  
a walking plant,  
self-enclosed, unbound from the soil,  
early sentience  
at home in your hall of mirrors.

-Luke Fischer, "Grasshopper in a Field," *Antipodes* 25.2 (2011): 123

One could not find this experience in a telephone book. To disregard this is to disrespect the unique face of reality as artistic experience. To fight against the fact that the artist senses the greatest satisfaction with his work when the living movements and inspirations of his heart, (or is it the

creative life in the world?) are wedded with his work of art, is to fight as a tyrant. To say that the essence of an art work has nothing to do with the creative experience of the artist is to deny specific experiences. The equalization of aspects of life must lead to equal care being brought to their specific characteristics.

It is self evident that a person's ideology and preconceptions can lead to insensitivity and lack of empathy. This insensitivity can blunt us toward other people, as Levinas shows, or toward immediate experiences within nature and society. It is possible to attempt an escape from such guilt and yet remain a prisoner in another form. We do this by swinging over to an extreme attitude which refuses to enter the thoughts of the world, the culture of the other, as specific and real presences. This is what we do when we deny the artist's inspiration as part of the work of art. Yet these are positive and specific actualities. Of course, it is good to guard against tendencies which blunt immediate openness and flexibility in perception and thinking. Yet, if we guard cultural vanity with such fury that we call all experience such vanity, what have we accomplished? We have accomplished saving our sensitivity and empathy for a world which we can never take part in. Then our striving to remain open has closed us off. We try to overcome oppression by more oppression.

One blindness is the naïve, and sometimes fanatic, belief that cultural cliché and dogma are equivalent with living reality. Another blind field is the refusal to acknowledge that people have access to the roots of living reality.

Between these two blind fields is life. People are searching for a culture which is not simply tradition, set ideas and political programs. These bury individual life. Yet, on the other hand, if we refuse to acknowledge

individual life as part of a world of real inspiration, we exclude humanity from the world. We could also say we exclude inspiration from the world by turning it into an abyss. One tendency follows the empty gestures of institutions and convention proclaiming the final solution, proclaiming the perfection of truth and beauty, yet it is nothing but cliché. The other denies the existence of creative life and inspiration in the universe, acknowledging only subjective culture which is always exterior to reality. Then the artist is a blind actor, as with Barthes and Burgin, excluded from the objective life of her work. Finally from their perspective, we each can only access our own ideology, and knowing this, all we can do is battle our ideology throughout life, trying never to mistake it for another person, or a part of the objective world.

## Living Aesthetics

In 1914 Rudolf Steiner, who explicitly founded the anthroposophically oriented science of the spirit, gave a lecture on art and the creative world of color. He describes one of his teachers, the Goethe scholar Herman Grimm (1828-1901), making the statement that Goethe would not really be understood until the year 2000. Grimm was referring to the fact that Goethe created and lived out of the totality of his humanity. Steiner looked around and saw how modern artists could not create out of a living relationship to their world, to their lives. Artists looked back to other cultures, other mythologies and tried to find inspiration in other times. They did this as the world had stopped speaking in all her immediacy, the world died. Culture was dead. Steiner observed how walking through the galleries and exhibits he met objects which left him cold. Every work of art

was a little closeted perspective that had grown out of a small studio which had isolated itself in cultures from other times, experiences of other people. Some shadowy, moonlit web of significance lit up at times, but it was pale and retreating. For Steiner this could only be so in a time when our whole relationship to life had become theoretical. We looked into the world and saw theories, webs of static, abstract ideas. Goethe existed in a world of *living* ideas and of elemental creative powers, and looking toward the year 2000, Rudolf Steiner stated:

And we are really living in a time, if people's life with the world is not to totally die, when this diving into the spiritual flooding of natural forces, of the spiritual powers that lie behind nature, must begin. We have to win once again the possibility of not simply looking at color and then outwardly painting it here or there, but rather we have to find the possibility to live with color, to experience the inner life-force of colors. We cannot achieve this by simply studying how this or that color acts here or there, by simply staring at the colors; we can only achieve this when we once again dive down with our whole souls into the way that red, the way that blue flows; when the flooding of colors becomes immediate and alive..... It is impossible to live into color's living nature if we cannot pass from rest directly into movement, if we are not immediately clear: The red disc here approaches you- the blue disc distances itself from you- they move in opposite directions....One comes to see, when we take this example and have two spheres like this before us, we could absolutely not imagine that these two spheres are still, we could not imagine this if we have any faith in color....Yet that which is living in the elements is dead for today's art. The air is dead, the water is dead, the light is dead, as they are painted today; form is dead the way it is presented in sculpture today. A

new art will arise when the human soul learns to deepen and sink into the elemental, which is living.

-The Creative World of Color, Philosophisch-Anthroposophischer Verlag, 1931, translation NW

We assume everything romantic is of the past. Yet it is possible to sense that romanticism has never matured. Goethe experienced art as a relative of science since he experienced the whole palace of the universe as a mutually supporting tapestry of real creative being. For Goethe, to practice art was to develop tendencies which are otherwise held in balance by other forces. He experienced in art activity something similar to that which shines in the sun, what leafs and blooms, but brought further than what is otherwise possible when left to itself in the world. Within the context of nature these activities cannot unfold further; they can do so only through the art. He felt that to be an artist was the greatest honor, for it was to be placed at the side of the creator. To create beauty was to create a small, independent cosmos. This is clearly expressed in his small essay "On Truth and Probability of the Work of Art." It must be emphasized that he describes experiencing these forces, not postulating them as possible theories.

We are in a desert where there is no pressing reason to experience one thing as more significant than the other. One and all are grains of sand. Through striving, something starts to resound with significance. One can hear it in the writing of Deleuze; one can see it in the moving eurythmist. The air, water and light, colors, forms and sounds all start to stir again. They are beginning to drop their shadowy, bone-woven masks and to re-join our immediate experience as living forces.

It is common to experience total disillusionment as progressive, yet it is also possible to feel a closer proximity to the world and to sense that this closeness is a glimmer of the future. It is doubtlessly true that Duchamp encapsulates what many feel as an enlightened and modern cultural attitude. Yet it is possible to consider Grimm's prophecy as an unfolding reality. It is possible to see Goethe appearing as a true postmodernist, for the modernists of his day and of two centuries after may be just beginning to know his significance. We can see that the sentiment at the root of Romanticism has not become common. For up to our day, people have not been able to sense the immediate presence of the world's more subtle life currents, creativity and qualities. The shedding of dead culture and cliché is necessary. No one who desires the fullness of life could be truly satisfied with a culture from another time. We desire an immediate and living culture. The problem is that our world experience is not cultural enough for us. That is why so many look backward. Our experience of the world is barren. This is why most of our culture is barren. The postmodern urge to live in an abyss is at least an urge to be culturally honest. Yet there is a better option than this. It is the striving to awaken to the immediacy of life and significance around and within us. This striving is not the same as self suggestion, the striving is inner activity which leads to a sensitivity for world suggestion. This is the same as perception. The world is home to more than inert and indifferent matter; it is home to universal spirit, life and feeling. The chemistry of the cultural universe is in its beginnings. It will be farther along when we learn to see that what is alive in human inspiration is also present and living in nature. It will become ridiculous to speak of culture and nature as essentially different. Then we will also understand Novalis, who writes:

When numbers and figures  
Are no longer the keys to all creatures,  
When they sing, or kiss  
More than the deeply learned know,  
When the world itself gives to free life,  
And again to the world is given,  
When once again light and shadow  
Are wed again creating true clarity,  
And one recognizes in fairy-tales and poems  
The ancient histories of the world,  
Then, before a single secret word,  
This entire inverted existence flies away.

-Novalis, Werke und Briefe, translation NW

This science of the spirit and the art that it inspires are attempts to fulfill what Emerson called out for at the beginning of his book *Nature*.

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season

in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

-Emerson, Nature, 1836