

Imagining Cultural Freedom

by Nathaniel Williams

The role that culture plays in society is one of the most widely discussed issues of our time. Some people argue that cultural freedom is the root of economic injustice and inequality. Others argue that freedom is the most important and sacred characteristic of culture. When we train our ear to the varied discourses in the world we hear this question being approached in the most varied forms. It is impossible to act with resolve in any direction without developing these perspectives into some coherent interrelationship. This essay is an attempt at exactly this, to show that these various perspectives unite in a surprising way, revealing that what is called free culture today is often an impotent poverty. We will start with considerations from the art world as they lead to an understanding of broader contemporary culture.

Since the '60s art and culture are less likely to be described in aesthetic isolation and they are being seen more and more as essentially indistinguishable from economic and political realities¹. This new attitude sees that many people are still floating in the dreamy soup of culture without raising context of culture into focus, yet this old, naïve state is quickly vanishing. To see art as an expression of creative spirit emanating from the artist's activity, is becoming more and more difficult.

Recent art inspires suspicion of culture

In 2000 it was possible to enter the Hirschorn Gallery in London and to discover that one of its second story walls had been opened up by an artist. A wall had become a passage. The passage led over the street into an anarchist book shop. The installation was called the bridge and was created by Thomas Hirschorn, an artist from Switzerland. This elicited many reactions. I would like to describe my impression. Walking into the gallery room you could have the subtle impression that you were in danger. You could suddenly feel that you were among seeming friends and perhaps under a spell, and somehow in the midst of this farce a true friend (Hirschorn) has snuck in to try to save you, to break the trance and offer an escape. But is he your true friend? Why are you inspired to trust this unusual character? Why do the white walls, track lights and price tags of the gallery ignite your suspicion? Though it may not be that anyone bolted across the bridge, (this I do not know), one can imagine the impulse, especially if one is familiar with the surreal atmosphere between the walls of high class galleries. Indeed, the spaces that house culture emit less and less of an air which reminds us of our friends and all that inspires us². In fact, it seems there is no air. Air could damage the culture (the last supper, the caves in France....). Culture sometimes appears as some alien, inhuman and priceless object which we have to protect. It is not an open and vulnerable revelation of life. It excludes us as we protect it. The artist Van Buren expressed this:

The work of art is so frightened of the world at large, it so needs isolation in order to exist, that any conceivable means of protection will suffice. It frames itself, withdraws under glass, barricades itself behind a bullet proof surface, surrounds itself with a

¹ One can see this reaching back to the beginning of the century in the workers movements, Da Da and Marcel Duchamp.

² Is this not enough to make sense of the Brucennial? <http://www.thebrucehighqualityfoundation.com/Site/Brucennial.html>

protective cordon, with instruments showing the room humidity, for even the slightest cold would be fatal. Ideally the work of art finds itself not just screened from the world, but shut up in a safe, permanently and totally sheltered from the eye. And yet isn't such an extremism, bordering on the absurd, already with us everyday, everywhere, when the artwork exhibits itself in those safes called 'Galleries', 'Museums'? Isn't it the very point of departure, the end, and the essential function of the work of art that it should be so exhibited?³

In 1974 Buren was part of an exhibition at the MoMa in NY. He showed paintings consisting of stripes on a corridor wall. He also placed painted stripes belonging to these pieces on a billboard in lower Manhattan. Here we experience that the Gallery can give anything the name of art. The exact same thing on a billboard would not receive this title. Buren has created a band of tension to help get people out of the "gallery", leading out of the stuffy corridor wall out into the open spaces of NYC. Here the expanse between "art" and life appears. He has also created a bridge in a less literal way. One can sense the absurdity that Van Buren refers to without necessarily having to agree with his description of this as cloistering as the "essential function of the work of art"⁴.

Yet, how *can* these things be understood?

Douglas Crimp describes the situation as follows, using Buren as an example, but speaking about a general tendency in recent culture:

....I take Buren's work to be exemplary (of art of the sixties and seventies), which sought to contest the myths of high art, to declare art, like all other forms of endeavor, to be contingent upon the real historical world. Moreover this art sought to discredit the myth of man and the ideology of humanism which it supports. For indeed these are all notions that sustain the dominant Bourgeois culture. They are the very hallmarks of bourgeois ideology. But if the art of the sixties and seventies sought, with its open assault on the artist as unique creator, to contest the myth of man as an eternal essence, there was another phenomena which had initiated that assault in the arts at the very founding moments of modernism, a phenomena from which painting has been in retreat since the mid nineteenth century. That phenomena is, of course, photography.⁵

For Douglas Crimp these bridges (Hischorn and Duren) are absolutely clear. The danger one wakes up to when witnessing the artist pop the invisible lock of the gallery is the ideology and mechanism of bourgeois culture. The artists are trying to undermine the myths in our culture, to free us from illusion and the particular sufferings that this illusion brings with it. *If the myth of man as a divine and creative being can be discredited then the elite class of humans, the bourgeois, will no longer be able to profit off of all the working people of the world.* Crimp indicates that we are really being called to wakefulness, that we are really being called to escape the sleepy illusion supporting the galleries and museums.

This view of "culture" playing a problematic role in our communities and our social relationships has been prominent over the last century, especially the latter half. In 1936 a version of this view was impressively articulated by the German thinker Walter Benjamin in an essay which has proven itself a monument of thought on culture. He clearly addresses the relationship between social revolution and photography indicated earlier by Crimp.

³ Daniel Buren, Reboundings

⁴ See foot note 10 on Marcel Duchamp

⁵ Douglas Crimp, The End of Painting

Human perception determined by technology and economy?

Besides being a Marxist, Walter Benjamin was inspired by two Austrian scholars⁶. Their method inspired him. By observing antique artwork they drew conclusions about how the people who lived at the time the artwork was created perceived. Benjamin sees that when you observe the panorama of human history, looking over the various cultural periods, one can recognize the entire mode of human existence changes. Just think of the difference between the modern lifestyle of someone in Germany and then compare it to the lifestyle of someone living in Germany 1500 years ago. But a people's mode of existence does not change alone, their very mode of perception changes as well. For Benjamin the organization of human perception is not simply a question of human nature, besides this you also have to take into account developments in history. He sees that modern developments of machines and new technologies bring a huge shift in the way people perceive the world. This is strongly connected to the arts of photography and cinema, but more generally to the ability to mechanically reproduce works of art.

Do we perceive differently due to the fact that works of art and images can be mechanically produced or reproduced? If so, Benjamin states that a whole new society could arise out of this.

First we have to look at the shift in our perception of life caused by photography and cinema according to Benjamin, then we can turn to the social effects of these changes.

Not long ago, if you possessed a work of art it was unique. It had been created by a particular artist during a particular time in history. When you touched the actual material it was made of you were keenly aware that you were touching the same material which had actually been present when the work was created. You could even get an idea of the age of the artwork by analyzing the materials used to create it. It placed you in connection with the history of humanity and the stories or myths that were associated with this history. It was one of a kind and connected to very particular events. It was irreplaceable. It called up before you a cloud of meaning and significance. Benjamin describes this experience as the perception of the aura which he tries to define in the iconographic statement:

A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.⁷

With the development of photography images could be mechanically created without end. The whole world became filled with images of a profoundly different nature than the images of the past, images that had emitted an aura. If you possessed a reproduction of a work of art, say a photo of a cathedral, your experience was very different than being there in person. First of all culture came to you! What had seemed to be the center of the world was now in your living room. It is very different from having an original in your living room. The substance which it was made of was not linked to events in history when the reproduced work was created, nor was it directly linked to the artist's deeds, hands and tools. You have a picture but now there is very little aura.

To make this more clear let's imagine that you have a drawing made by an artist. You have, besides, a copy which the artist made by hand. Lastly you have a photo of the original. If you tear the photographic copy you will not

⁶ These two scholars were Riegl and Wickhoff.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

feel as much loss as when you tear the copy made by hand. When you tear the original you will experience the most loss. You can take this further and imagine a time when all the objects a person perceived in life were handmade and singular. Then remember the daily reality of contemporary life, where the majority of objects and images we encounter are technological copies.

Changes in human perception effect social relationships

For Benjamin meditation on these experiences reveals their eventual effects in social relations. He tries to indicate this by comparing the creation of images as a painter and the creation of a motion picture with a camera. One points toward a more degenerate social reality based on hierarchy, the other to one more just and equitable:

How does the cameraman compare with the painter? To answer this we take recourse to an analogy with a surgical operation. The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient's body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, in contrast to the magician - who is still hidden in the medical practitioner - the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him.

Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. (WB is stating that through this new equipment one enters directly into the unmediated and objective. NW) And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art.⁸

With the magician artist disappearing and the technician making more and more images the possibility of an equitable social order is emerging, according to Benjamin. We see that technology has undergone a huge intensification as a variable in human life. The forces of history have brought this about over the last 500 years. These developments create the possibility of revolutionizing the current social order. A people surrounded by works without aura will be supported to develop more equity and justice in their society. The appearance of technology in the world can be seen as a cosmic encouragement for humanity to evolve. The capitalist social structure, illustrated as the magician/painter, is an inferior evolutionary state of human society for Walter Benjamin.

When engaging culture we feel it cannot stand on its own

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

Now let us take pause and reflect once again on our point of departure. The most difficult thing in life is to get to the root of things. For this we have to avoid getting lost in the leafy spread and blossoms and try to reach down to what is anchoring something. Keeping in mind the thoughts we have just created let us try to enter more deeply into the issue by sketching their broad characteristics: One has to say that culture⁹, those promoting culture and places dedicated to culture are all suspect. When seeking to understand the fundamental causes of culture one has to look at social relations, the context in which it appears and particularly at the economy. Even though Benjamin sees technology and art at the root of human perception he sees them as shifting and unstable elements which become significant when they are viewed in relationship to social realities. After steeping oneself in these thoughts it is even difficult to talk about works of art in any unmediated manner, our gaze is constantly being drawn to means of production or to economic relations¹⁰.

Let us dwell on this characterization for a moment. When staring at a word in an unknown language it might appear to be a drawing at first. The letters appear as compositional parts of an image but you do not attach any meaning to the drawing, you simply follow the shapes of the letters with your eyes. How different your experience becomes when the meaning drops in, a luminous surprise. The clear instinct of looking at economic and political causes as explanations of culture is a support for most of contemporary consciousness, we do not have a strong experience of inspiration and culture as positive and fundamental parts of our lives, as pillars of the universal order. We are convinced that the world is a place of power struggles, in politics and wealth. When we see works of “genius” we see the functioning of veiled economic and historical forces. Now we have to attempt to understand the significance of this tendency, what it means. But first we have to look at another example for it is clear that this would not be a true characteristic of our time if it only applied to people of a certain theoretical leaning, for instance Marxists. But I am convinced that this characterization reaches beyond ideologies into the modern human experience. Read, for example, the writings of John Gage, an art historian of our day who has authored many books on color. He concludes one of them with the words:

The reasons for avoiding color have thus been as various, and as inflected by social and political ideologies, as the reasons for using it abundantly. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this book, color in art is no less a cultural phenomena than in any other branch of human activity. Even in physics and chemistry, where the causes and materials of color were always available, it has a history, because what we understand as “color” is essentially psychological, and human consciousness is a historical development. All color practices have their specific contexts and their specific rationale, so that color must be at last not simply a branch- and a minor one- of formal analysis, but must be fully integrated into the history of art.¹¹

When standing before the painting of the night café by Van Gogh, I am struck by the specific mood and drama of the color and composition. Gage explains that I am experiencing a psychological process rooted in the particular

⁹ With culture I am referring, as may be clear already, to aspects of society, art, thought and beliefs of full and vital inner experience. The word cultural is slowly losing the ability to express this. It has been a term which could relate expansive and deep inner experience, closely intertwined with the imagination and moral realities.

¹⁰ The Fountain by Marcel Duchamp will become an icon with this characteristic at its heart. Around 100 years ago Duchamp took a mass produced porcelain urinal and submitted it as an artwork entitled fountain and signed R Mutt. Though this original urinal was evidently lost Duchamp later organized another one. He took an object usually used for urinating, and placed it in a new context. Why would you appreciate the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of a urinal on a stand and not in the restroom? Why does the fountain now have a value estimated at around 3 million USD? The fountain reveals, among other things, that in our age an object placed in a certain context will accumulate nebulous qualities and become coveted, but is it truly value that it accumulates? As has been noticed, R Mutt does sound like armut, which means poverty in German.

¹¹ John Gage, Color and Art

historical, social, ideological context in which I find myself and the artwork. The experience is psychological, meaning a product of historical events that lie outside of immediate consciousness. The “artistic” experiences are certainly not universal in any way. How I experience color will change and if I want to understand this change I will need to research the ideological and social events of the age, which will explain it.

It is interesting to read Van Gogh describe this work in a letter to his brother as his attempt:

...to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green.

The room is blood red and dark yellow with a green billiard table in the middle; there are four citron-yellow lamps with a glow of orange and green. Everywhere there is a clash and contrast of the most disparate reds and greens in the figures of little sleeping hooligans, in the empty, dreary room, in violet and blue. The blood-red and the yellow-green of the billiard table, for instance, contrast with the soft tender Louis XV green of the counter, on which there is a pink nosegay. The white coat of the landlord, awake in a corner of that furnace, turns citron-yellow or pale luminous green.¹²

It is striking how different a Van Gogh stands before a painting than a John Gage. For Van Gogh the colors are directly and essentially related to aspects of the heart, passions and emotion. He stands before art and the colors speak of human life, trials, and redemptions, virtues and vices. Gage stands before these same colors and sees how a dramatic mirage has been built up by historical forces. This mirage(human culture) does not see its own feet. I am not implying that Gage does not enjoy the “mirage” of art, I am trying to articulate the feeling which must persist below this enjoyment given his own convictions.

Now many people know that the attitude that we find in Van Gogh inspired many artists and that not 70 years ago, before the death of the author¹³, it was possible that culture was more readily seen as intrinsically related to the creative spirit of the artist who lived in the essence of her medium, which was present in the heart (not a mirage, but the heart) of the work of art. If we go further back even a superficial knowledge of literature and culture will find reference to genius as an internal/external spiritual influence. We find that the spirit of the artist and the spirit of the world are seen as related. Then the genius was a being which visited the artist and filled him with an active and moving substance, which possessed and determined his actions. Following Gage our experience of the genius in art is a process of human consciousness, if you want to understand *why* you respond to works of art in certain ways you have to go beyond genius, outside of art and see how it is being shaped by, for instance, historical events and material scarcity among other things, “human consciousness is a historical development”. Genius is secondary.

Materialism, a term for this mode of perception

Despite the fact that Gage arrives at his thoughts through modern science, without mixing in Marxist political thought he also tries to strive beyond culture to social/economic developments. He is a creative witness to the idea that we do not have a strong experience of inspiration and culture as positive and fundamental parts of our lives, as pillars of

¹² Letter to Theo September 8, 1888

¹³ See Roland Barthes, Image Music Text

the universal order. The battle Crimp describes that has been waged against genius and the myths of man as an eternal essence has been achieved already for when we see works of “genius” we see the functioning of economic, political and historical forces. Indeed I am convinced that it was won in essence long before the sixties and seventies. It seems to me that the “battle” Crimp describes is simply a symptom of a deeper process, a process much greater than conceptualism or pop/realism ever thought. I would like to now follow the sharp and well witted Barfield in calling this characteristic of modern experience materialism. He describes the term in an essay as follows:

“Materialism” in my title means, not any materialistic philosophy, a la Haeckel or Lenin, but the mental habit of taking for granted, *for all practical purposes and most theoretical ones*, that the human psyche is intrinsically alienated from nature... a habit so inveterate as to have entered into the meanings of a great many common words and thus to have become accepted as common sense itself. Materialism in this sense is not, for instance, incompatible with deep religious conviction.¹⁴

Now, as Owen Barfield has also explained, one could describe this sense for reality as a gesture¹⁵. When an experience which is cultural or artistic arises the modern instinct is an immediate attempt to explain it as a **projection** onto the world. Human experience does not simply arise out of the strata of universal substance, it is a subjective addition to this substance. It is in the latter that the real and fundamental causes of reality exist. Gage wants to get beyond cultural **projection** of how we experience color to the real historical causes. Benjamin wants the cultural **projection** of imaginative painting to be dissolved in the cleansing objective light of the camera, he wants to replace the genius with the technician. He wants imagination to give way to perception revealed by modern devices.

Let’s take into our considerations “primitive” culture which we have touched on. Earlier I stated that the triumph of materialism could be seen as part of a larger process. A friend once told me of an artist who attended a dance performance. The dance performance was a religious dance of a certain tribal people. The performance was being performed in a western country in a hall where refreshments were being served. The crowd was to be entertained by the dance. At the table where this certain artist was sitting a conversation was underway of how in the “civilized world” people take culture lightly. There was no deep interest in the cultural reasons for the dance or its ritualistic place in the universe. These dancers were performing a dance which was, or had been, rooted in their view of reality, which was religious, and they were performing it out of context for the entertainment of people who had no clue what its place or meaning was. At a certain point in the conversation the artist picked up a lemon from the table and declared that so long as what was most immediate was not divine, our culture would also turn into shallow entertainment.¹⁶

Using current experience as a standard for the past is a projection

¹⁴ Owen Barfield, The Coming Trauma of Materialism

¹⁵ Owen Barfield, the Harp and the Camera

¹⁶ An excellent example of this tension between culture as a spectacle and culture as a part of life is documented in the excellent book on the African Bushmen by Laurens Van Der Post, the lost World of the Kalahari. Particularly his descriptions of his expedition to the Slippery Hills and the later refusal of the Bushman to share dances and stories without the appropriate context accompanying them, the context in the greater movements of the seasons and the appropriate context within the hearts of Laurens and his companions.

No one needs to demonstrate the obvious, that for the last centuries the modern westerner has largely been considered the enlightened one in relation to older cultures which still believe in the primacy of a creative spirit in the universe. These peoples are often seen as superstitious and ill educated. They have not pierced the screen showing the **projection** of culture. They have not woken up to the arbitrary and inhumane machinery of reality. When we look back into the past we find cultures, which spoke directly of the spirit and soul flowing through the sky, the sun and the trees, permeating and forming the human body, human thoughts and society. Today, deep down, it is hard to take this seriously. We think they must have perceived life like us, they did not *really* believe in mythology. Here we must stop ourselves. We must demand the courage to at least *consider that it is us* that have not mastered our **projections**. *We must consider* that our imaginations of past cultures made up of people with our exact faculties of perception could be the cognitional sin we are pompously condemning these ancient people of. This sin is the sin of **projection**, covering up the real state of affairs. Barfield provides a humorous and clear description of this possibility. It is from an essay in which he describes the camera and the projector as influential metaphors used to illumine modern human experience, replacing the older metaphor of the Aeolian harp over the last 500 years:

So it is that, in the age of the movie, the student of words who is unfashionable enough to examine their history as well as their current use, is not perhaps so impressed as some others are by the universal practice of projection not only in movie houses and on the television screen, but also, as a concealed metaphor, in the ingenious fancies of men. Is projection itself being projected? He finds, for instance, scientists and philosophers joining hands to assure us that the familiar world around us is a projection of our own mental apparatus onto a kind of wall of imperceptible realities, not perhaps a blank wall, but it might just as well be blank for all the resemblance it bears to anything we do actually see or hear. Or again, when he turns to the psychologists, he finds projections (or perhaps they might also be called projectiles) in the form of neuroses, fantasies, mother-images, father-fixations, feelings of guilt, and various parts of the body including its secreta and excreta, flying to and fro among them so thick and fast that he has to duck to avoid them. Or again, when the psychologists join hands with the anthropologists, he sees a whole cloud of these projectiles flying off in the same direction and landing on the same target- namely, the mind of that luckless repository, primitive man. One thing at least is made very clear from what all these informative people are fond of telling us about primitive man and that is that, whatever else he was doing he was always projecting his insides onto something or other. It was his principal occupation. He must presumably have had one or two other things to do as well, but that is what he majored in...Could it be ourselves who are doing the projecting, when we talk of primitive man in that confident way?... Are we so sure that he even *had* any inside to speak of? The punctiliar sort that *projects*? Now I personally am quite sure that he had not. Moreover I am firmly persuaded that we shall never get anywhere with our anthropological attempts at reconstructing the mind of primitive man until we make up our minds to throw away all this projectile business. If we *must* think in metaphor (and we must), why not try beginning again on the assumption that primitive man was not a camera obscura but an Aeolian harp. Surely it is only by this route that we can hope to understand the origin of myths and of thinking at all.¹⁷

We can follow Barfield's thoughts and consider that primitive man did not have an inside to project, that perhaps he was an Aeolian harp, de-centered into the periphery. His inside was the sky and the stars. Soloviev, the Russian poet and Philosopher, describes such an origin of humanity:

Before as the spiritual center of the cosmos, human beings embraced in their souls all nature, lived one life with it, loved and understood it, and therefore governed it. But now, having asserted themselves in their selfhood, having shut themselves off from everything, human beings find themselves in an alien and hostile world, which no longer speaks in any intelligible language and does not understand or obey their words. Before, human beings had in their consciousness a direct expression of the universal organic union of all that exists, and that unity determined the whole of their consciousness.¹⁸

¹⁷ Owen Barfield, *The Harp and the Camera*

¹⁸ Vladimir Soloviev, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*

Now it has to appear as a matter of course that this consideration will be difficult for many people to take seriously as contemporary thought indicates that such a thing is completely impossible and Soloviev's descriptions can only be "poetry" or "theology", meaning more mirages, not descriptions of knowledge. The idea that consciousness evolves presented here by Barfield and the Christian philosopher Soloviev is not totally alien to our time. We find a version of it in the popular and wide spread American philosophies of both Ken Wilber and Jacob Needleman¹⁹. Still, we can sense a common instinctual rejection of such considerations, and besides there is a conscious battle against them. Indeed, I am not naïve to the fact that there is a deep seated belief that exactly thoughts like Soloviev's lead to war, discord and illusion²⁰. Despite the convincing power of such arguments (which is largely linked in my opinion to the common modern psycho/physical constitution we have been exploring) any possibility of a humane society is lacking if they were true. Why is this? It is because all virtue, all goodness and inspiration, all that the human heart loves, is seen as hollow and insubstantial. How can a world view which denies the rooted presence of morality and culture in the universe promise a humane future society?²¹ Still, the arguments I am referring to describe inspired culture as the enemy of social justice and individual respect.

The feeling that reality is amoral inspires faith that regulation leads to social harmony

We can see this finding expression in how we think of creating social change. Our materialistic instincts do not only express themselves in our theories, they express themselves in how we try to reform society. Today people think human values, human inspirations, humane culture will simply come from setting up conditions correctly, or getting someone elected who will change social structures and laws. We need to have new policies in our societies, we need new programs in our government. We need to have tough laws to drive down crime. We need to give more tax money to poor people in dire need. Since the human being is a result of socio/economic and historical processes, we need to set up laws to influence us. The state will regulate us and produce social harmony. If we want to effect change we need to reach into the real causes at the root of the tree of reality, that's right, the pocketbook, and through that into the courtrooms and legal measures. Surely we can learn this from the American civil rights movement, where the activists did not rely on the goodness of their story to win people over, but instead engaged in boycotting and store picketing, with astounding success. Indeed, no one can doubt that using economic relations as a tool for changing society is extremely effective, and this is exactly what we like to hear today. We are mistaken, however, if we think that this feeling was the enduring hope of the civil rights movement. The most influential leader of that movement, Martin Luther King Jr, knew that you could get a racist to hire a person of another race by applying some social pressure, he knew that you could change some legislation by uniting thousands of people together in cooperative, strategic economic

¹⁹ See Ken Wilber's *A Brief History of Everything* and Jacob Needleman's *A Sense for the Cosmos*.

²⁰ See Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and Burgin's *The End of Art Theory*

²¹ For the total death of the author, despite what Roland Barthes asserts, leads also to the death of the reader. It is this knowledge which brings Martin Luther King Jr to "...refuse to accept the idea man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him." and to insist on Justice as a universal power, not a cultural mirage.

boycotts. But he did not think that this was sufficient. He points to this piecemeal progress (which he knew how to appreciate) and its insufficiency in a speech in 1967:

...one night, a juror came to Jesus and he wanted to know what he could do to be saved. Jesus didn't get bogged down in the kind of isolated approach of what he shouldn't do. Jesus didn't say, "Now Nicodemus, you must stop lying." He didn't say, "Nicodemus, you must stop cheating if you are doing that." He didn't say, "Nicodemus, you must not commit adultery." He didn't say, "Nicodemus, now you must stop drinking liquor if you are doing that excessively." He said something altogether different, because Jesus realized something basic – that if a man will lie, he will steal. And if a man will steal, he will kill. So instead of just getting bogged down in one thing, Jesus looked at him and said, "Nicodemus, you must be born again."

He said, in other words, "Your whole structure must be changed." A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will "thingify" them – make them things. Therefore they will exploit them, and poor people generally, economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together. What I am saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, "America, you must be born again!"²²

One would have to be blind to think this change of heart has occurred since 1967, indeed, we find this speech published in 2001 with an introduction from Edward Kennedy who wrote-

Clearly, we've made progress since 1967, and all Americans owe Dr. King a tremendous debt of gratitude. But we're still fighting for economic justice and true equality, and it's unfortunate that we often also find ourselves fighting a rearguard action to protect the gains of the past.²³

We find this sentiment echoed by William Pepper who writes about the civil rights movement-

We have learned by now that a political revolution is not enough. It must be part of a broader social, economic and cultural revolution which goes to the very essence of the type of human being developed and quality of life which is being affirmed.²⁴

The creation of laws and institutions must be accompanied by cultural force in order to be sustainable

Martin Luther King Jr describes his goal as that of transforming a culture valuing things into a culture of spiritual values. He was convinced that a people who saw the world as devoid of spirit was bound to treat one another exactly so. If we are willing to consider this goal we can sense a picture of life in us which takes some courage to face. It is the image of a world experience which is much more full and alive than the one commonly acknowledged. We can sense the lemons as well as the humans beginning to reveal more than can be easily described. We can sense that societal problems which have weighed on our hearts as simply apocalyptic and irreparable begin to entertain possible redemption. The sentiment that culture and spirituality are linked to elitism, that they lead to oppression and injustice starts to reveal itself as the necessary conclusion of all people who sense consciousness as alien to the universe.

²² Martin Luther King Jr, *Where Do We Go From Here?*

²³ Edward Kennedy, *A Call to Conscience*

²⁴ William Pepper, *An act of State, the Execution of Martin Luther King*

For this to remain an image, for this to be considered theoretically is exactly beside the point. A true change must occur in our culture, in our very experience of life for anything significant to follow. There are those who have provided excellent illustration of this process in the last 100 years. One of the most remarkable is celebrating his 150th birthday this year, which is more well known in Europe where two of the most significant public exhibitions relating to his life work were on display²⁵. I am speaking of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy²⁶.

Social three folding is an example of sustainable social change

Let us focus on the place of culture within society according to Steiner. His developed sociological insights can be found in his elaborations of the threefold social organism²⁷. He articulated these thoughts after the first world war. At this time middle Europe was in a chaotic condition and the German people had little trust in their national leaders who had displayed their incompetence in the time before, during and directly after the war. Steiner was trying to work into this chaotic and untrusting atmosphere with middle European politicians and nobles and many activists toward a healthy framework for human society. There was never a national implementation of these ideas but there were some smaller initiatives, most of which could not survive the inflation of the 1920's.

What was Steiner's perspective of the place that culture and art played in this threefold social organism? He saw, as did Martin Luther King Jr, that true health in our markets and our state structure is only possible if a culture can arise which has moral vitality and this is when it is not dictated to by either business or the state. He saw that the culture of Europe in 1920 was impotent and could not support greater justice and peace, nor was culture even available to the majority of people. He described conditions which could facilitate a renewal, a renaissance of living and accessible culture. He saw it as fundamentally crippling for the state to be involved in the administration of culture, such as creating or funding schools. He saw it as equally as debilitating for business to act as an *influential* financier or inspirer for culture. Culture, for it to become strong and healthy, for it to contain vital humane substance for action,

²⁵ KunstMuseum Wolfsburg and KunstMuseum Stuttgart

²⁶ Anthroposophy, or spiritual science, is the name that Steiner gave to the methods of research, and the results of this research, which he developed. Besides being exceptionally gifted, the methods grew out of his own innovative work with scientific inquiry that had been developed in middle Europe by such individuals as Goethe, Fichte, Hegel, Steffens and Haeckel to name only a few. It is a development which will gain more and more attention as a truly unique direction for the furthering of human knowledge. The closest example we have in American Culture are the attempts of Ralph Waldo Emerson to approach all mind and soul experiences with the same faith and attention with which empiricists approached the physical/material world, to develop a Natural History of Intellect. Middle European cultural development has not shown its ultimate effects yet and remains mostly invisible to us in America as our attitudes are much more informed by the nominalist and reductionist empirical philosophies of England and America. To learn more see Steiner's book *Theosophy or the Philosophy of Freedom*.

²⁷ See *The Renewal of the Social Organism and Towards Social Renewal*

needs to be independent of these other two spheres of society. He could attribute this central place to culture while maintaining a clear and differentiated understanding of economic reality²⁸.

Societies must cultivate individual freedom in all matters of culture in order to promote morality, vitality and creativity

If schools, religious associations and theaters, to take a few instances, were freed from their need to cater to political agendas or “wisdom” won in the world market then capable individuals could develop cultural life out of their own intrinsic nature. What is at the root of these freed intrinsic impulses? Human creativity, inspiration and morality.

Political and Legal measures for the nurturance of the spirit sap the strength of the cultural life, while a cultural life that is left entirely to its own inherent interests and impulses will strengthen every aspect of social life...human ethical impulses wither away if they are not allowed to arise within a free cultural life, but are instead forced to take the particular turn that the political-legal structure of society finds necessary for carrying on work in the spheres it has previously mapped out. A person brought up and educated within a free cultural life will certainly, through his very initiative, bring along into his calling the stamp of his or her own personality. Such a person will not allow himself to be fitted into the social works like a cog into a machine. In the end, however, what he brings into it will not disturb the harmony of the whole, but rather increase it.²⁹

But, how is this possible? After the majority of his efforts in politics revealed their futility Steiner poured his energy and strength into this task, of freeing the impulses in the human being from aspects of society which could distort them. The most successful fruit of this labor is the international movement of Waldorf schools. The first school was started for cigarette factory worker children in Stuttgart, Germany. There he explicitly set up the school so that, as much as possible, the teachers were active in everything. The *money for the school came from proceeds of the factory* but the management of the school remained in the hands of the teachers, and Steiner while he lived. Culture was to be supported by profits generated in the economy, yet the management and distribution of the funds allotted to the cultural projects had to be left up to the inspiration of the teachers. By safeguarding the teachers from external regulation or any curriculum which might be forced on them by the state or the business community³⁰, he guaranteed them a space where they could follow their own best, professional inspirations. He was convinced that this would lead to the best, most fruitful teachers. He also indicated that children who sensed their teachers were acting out of themselves would develop an instinctual feeling for autonomy and freedom, whereas children growing up with adults who were constantly following orders would have a harder time maturing to freedom.

Insuring and encouraging freedom was a very important matter for Steiner as he saw the source of morality in the human being who is able to follow impulses that are intrinsic to her nature³¹. The very insights into the nature of society which he called social three folding he had mined from these deep impulses. He states this clearly in an article:

²⁸ See *World Economy*

²⁹ See Rudolf Steiner, *Culture, Law and Economics in The Renewal of the Social Organism*

³⁰ For an example of culture being thwarted by the state readers are encouraged to look into the no child left behind program of the US government. For an example of business leaders wielding a heavy hand in culture look into the influence of Bill Gates, where it is clear that economic power can be transferred almost directly into cultural influence.

³¹ This way of looking at culture inspired Joseph Beuys in his creation of the Free International University.

The impulse toward evil arises in us only because in our thoughts and feelings we silence the depths of our own nature. Accordingly, social ideas that are arrived at through the sort of spiritual concepts indicated here must, by their very nature, be ethical as well. Since they are not drawn from thought alone, but from life, they possess the strength to take hold of the will and to live in action.³²

He considered that the Waldorf school in Stuttgart would be a failure if it did not inspire a movement³³. In these schools, which were to be places where teachers could teach directly out of their understanding of how the latent capacities in human nature best unfold, he was creating a vessel for living culture. He described this intention in a lecture:

We must look reality in the face in a living way. Do not think that it would occur to me for a single moment to ridicule those who out of inner conviction are inclined to say: Well, really, things are not so bad; too much is made of it all, for other schools get on quite alright. No, that is not the point! I know very well how much work and effort and even spirit are to be found in the schools of today. I fully recognize this. But unfortunately human beings today do not look ahead in their thinking. They do not see the threads connecting education, as it has become in the last few centuries, with what is approaching us with all the violence of a storm, threatening to ravage and lay waste our social life. Anthroposophy knows what conditions are essential to the development of culture in the future; this alone compels us to work out of such methods³⁴ as you will find in our education. Our concern is to provide humanity with the possibility of progress, to save it from retrogression.³⁵

Let us retrace our path. We began with the symptom of our time, that culture and spirit are impotent bi-products of an external and amoral universe. By calling out our own projections we were led to sense a time when the whole world was not an economic/political power struggle but a world of culture and spirit. The impossibility of a humane society in a world which denies human culture leads us to seek the conditions for a post theoretical culture, one filled with the vitality of a living culture. The conditions which open the gates of this fount remain our greatest dilemma, as they were for the civil rights movement. It is my conviction that the path to this renewal is through the creation of the free sphere of culture³⁶ which needs to draw its financial nourishment (not its direction) from profits generated by business, after everyone's needs have been met.³⁷ It is difficult to imagine the immense change that such a redirection of the profits generated through our economy would unleash.³⁸

³² See Rudolf Steiner, *Culture, Law and Economics in The Renewal of the Social Organism*

³³ Today there are over 1,000 waldorf schools worldwide.

³⁴ The methods Steiner refers to were his, and the circle of teachers working with him, best attempts at creating a curriculum and ideas for teaching which could best facilitate children's growth and maturation toward **freedom**, as might be imagined from previous quotes.

³⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *Human Values in Education*, lecture X

³⁶ See Emmanuel Levinas *Peace and Proximity and The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other*, as he arrives at the conclusion that the state must be humanized by a free realm of prophecy or culture in order to become moral.

³⁷ For a good direction for funding culture after people's basic needs are met first look at the independent currency called the Schimgauer. It is a currency that expires. If you have not spent a bill in three months it loses its value. You can renew it by paying 2% of its total value. This 2% goes to upkeep of the currency administration and to local not for profits. The note can only be renewed 7 times. This could be set up so that the money one did not need could be given to not for profits of one's choice. The fact that the money is aging means that the owners are not in dire need and that a portion of it should flow toward culture, not for profit activity. Allowing individuals to choose where excess funds go also helps insure that our profits are not being wasted on research projects which have no relevance. Such projects are funded in part by government subsidies which direct tax money into various "cultural" directions and this meal ticket allows various teachers and researchers to simply "publish" and maintain a salary, despite the fact that their teaching, publications, and research, as I have unfortunately witnessed firsthand, are meaningless, even for them.

Of course it is clear, indeed it is the very heart of this essay, that this perspective will contrast with many contemporary perspectives and anyone who thinks I am naïve to the fact that this advice is the opposite of what popular theoretical culture has set as the right course has not read carefully. I simply maintain that many popular intellectual perspectives have drawn conclusions of the role of culture in society while using a bloodless and dead culture as the norm. They are prisoner to their short sightedness which keeps the spirit of life out of view. Their shortsightedness is a result of today's dead culture³⁹. They think that they will achieve justice and peace without renewing culture, but the truth is that all laws, justice, and all innovations and exchanges in the great economy of the world will continue to dry up and become senseless distortions of humanity without renewing culture.

Current views on culture are based on shadows of its true nature, vital culture will only appear if we act

We need new culture, free of reactionary and influential ties to politics and cultural marketing. We can hope that culture will start to permeate life so that to put our art in a museum would be at the same time to confess our spiritual poverty, for to make a warehouse for art is to show that our society has no place for it, that we are artless. This is what is at the root of the absurdity Van Buren points to, the huge gap which exists between "culture" and daily life. It is the same gulf that lies between lemons and spiritual aspects of life. These thoughts suggest to everyone who senses the urgency of our present situation to create social forms in their communities, indeed larger regional associations working consciously with these goals. These associations could have as a goal the creation of spaces where teachers can teach with the free spirit, following the intuitions which seem to appear like steps on a path to their student's mature development; where painters can paint so that the colors are immediately alive with deeper harmonies of life;

³⁸ We need only think of how much creative work would suddenly be left to follow disinterested yet existential paths to sense what I mean. According to Johannes Rohen in his book, *Functional Threefoldness in the Human Organism and Human Society*, more than half of the mathematicians in the USA are answerable to the pentagon either as employees or through contracted projects. Besides this just think how currently huge amounts of capital which is being generated in our economy and connected to corporations is being funneled in the two directions of extreme wealth of shareholders and select employees on the one hand and "research and development" on the other. The unimaginable wealth pouring through the many companies like Monsanto, whose research leads to technologies that can hardly be thought of as developed for the general prosperity and wellbeing of the greater world, should be taken into account as unfortunate examples of "research and development".

³⁹ Julian Sallabross closes his recent introduction to contemporary art with exactly such contrasting advice. He points out that useful art insures that it will stay rooted to human life and realistic values. Yet we can read our day as needing something quite different, if related. Think of two recent contrasting events, one is the "documentary" *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, at least partly created by the street artist Banksy, where a totally inartistic figure becomes a successful artist merely because of some reviews. On the other hand take into account that "In 2007, Joshua Bell – one of the world's most august violinists – busked for 43 minutes at the entrance to a Washington DC subway station. He played works, on his legendary Stradivarius, including Bach's monumental Chaconne from the second solo partita. He made a total of \$52.17..." This was reported in the *Guardian*, and was an experiment organized by the *Washington Post* to see if "In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?" Well, no "The busy commuters' general lack of interest in Bell's breathtaking virtuosity was lamented in the *Post*, held up as a sign of the times, of the increasing irrelevance of beauty to the modern world. The subtext was that culture was losing focus: people don't know what to appreciate any more." I would like to suggest that the money which is currently going toward culture and is being directed by governments and corporations be placed into the hands of citizens, a special culture currency, for instance, which could only be given to independent, not for profit cultural initiatives that one appreciates. Then we could hope that the individual's muscle of appreciation which has been atrophied by the lack of engagement, as our culture is almost totally managed from without by profit seeking business and tax subsidies, could be re-enlivened. Such a direction could also lead to particularly those initiatives finding support whose work was truly appreciated by individual community members. An art course whose funding structure and teaching content was created with these issues in mind is the Free Columbia Art Course in Columbia County, NY.

where lectures are filled with the more subtle inspirations of the world, movements reaching even into the sounds of the words, where philosophers thought patterns exhibit a delicacy akin to the majesty and subtle variety of nature, and research can unfold to show that even that which seems furthest from the spirit contains revelation. Then we can hope that all our cultural activity, all our artwork will become so many bridges out of all these inhumane cultural warehouses and libraries, including those of our current thought, into the spirit of life.