ART AND INTUITION, OR PYGMALION REDISCOVERED
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While this essay does not deal explicitly with the relation between eastern and western aesthetics, its choice of theme seizes on a dimension of art which, perhaps more than any other, spans both traditions. Indeed intuition, as it is developed in the discussion that follows, can be taken as the characteristic feature of much oriental art, surfacing particularly in the landscape painting of China and Japan, and in that remarkable poetic form, the haiku. Yet this same artistic quality has become explicit at times in western art too, as in the impressionist and post-impressionist painting of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (itself influenced by the study of oriental art), and romantic poetry of 19th century England. But that art which most fully and consistently embodies the intuitive impulse is music, and this without regard to cultural tradition. It is my contention, however, that an aesthetics of intuition is capable of general illumination in art and not just of the art of particular modes and styles. Since it is in the East, though, that art seems to have expressed this trait most openly, to develop intuition as a concept in an aesthetics of western art is, then, something of an acknowledgment of the lesson taught by the artistic tradition of the orient.

It is, I suppose, safe to say that art possesses a disconcerting ambiguity. On the one hand it epitomizes high culture, and on the other it infuses the crafts and artifacts of practical life. Art claims independence and aloofness and yet insinuates itself into the intimacies of self-knowledge, personal relationships, and the condition of being human. Because art acknowledges no safe limits but both pulls away from ordinary experience and yet spills back into it, philosophers have been hard put to account for this least categorizable of experiences. Hence theories of art equal in variety and ingenuity those not only of God but even of man.

The oldest and still most widespread view of the nature of art is that which finds the coursings of art somewhat akin to those of knowledge, with the artist capturing the truth of things in their appearances and actions, and the perceiver of his work gaining penetrating insights into the workings of his world of
experience. Theater, the novel, representational painting all easily exemplify the conception of art as a provider of knowledge, and this view finds theoretical expression in the imitation theories that have dominated the history of aesthetics, as well as in the more subtle views of art as symbol (developed for instance, in the writings of Cassirer and Langer). There are many reasons, largely historical, why cognitive theories should have emerged early in the quest for philosophic understanding of art, and a century of criticism has served to expose the confusions and limitations of view which still retains wide appeal, especially among the untutored. Yet it is too easy to dismiss these theories on the basis of simplistic cognitive claims which have been made by their proponents and attacked by their detractors. For it is perhaps not only the adoption for the cognitive model of experience that has led philosophers to discover in art a source of knowledge; to seek understanding through art may also follow from the connections the arts have with human conditions and experiences such that the arts are able to speak sympathetically to them. Insofar as the arts reach our to touch the conditions of people’s lives, we must in some fashion recognize and account for these connections.

There is also an independence that all the arts exhibit, a kind of aplomb with which they move freely in a realm of splendid isolation. For the arts elaborate their own rules and stand apart from the conventions that domesticate the imagination. Thus art pour l’art is a fair expression of the creative independence of the artistic activity. With a certain aloofness the arts are free to exploit, the, resources of their materials and develop a virtuoso condition of self-contained brilliance and strength. In the formal purity of baroque and classical music, in the precision of de Stijl and hard edge painting, in the geometric shapes of Bauhaus functionalism, the self-containment of art proclaims itself.

Yet there is something more. Somehow, despite their apparent autonomy, the arts transcend their realm, bursting past the limits of expectation and convention to surpass the established boundaries of the self, of society, of knowledge, indeed of art itself. There is a touch of the wondrous in this, for the creative act illuminates the possibilities of human transcendence which we all share when we engage in the art.

How is this to be explained? To overlook this special force in our account of art is to turn poetry into plain speech, to render it clear by making it transparent. In what way can we understand this strange power of art without negating it in the process?

Not in cognitive theories, not in claims for artistic autonomy nor as expression or communication do the arts reveal themselves most completely. There is a strange intercourse between art and world, and it well may be that the intuitive impulse more than any other captures the qualities of its workings. Let me return here to that earliest of theories, for I suspect that the clue to this puzzling connection between the world of the arts and the arts of the world, a unanimity so dominant a theme in much
contemporary art, may be discovered in the original perceptions of imitation.

Taken in its literal sense, imitation does not signify copying or resemblance; it is not, as it is usually represented, a theory of appearances. The etymology of *mimesis* suggests that the word derives from the verb *mimesthai* whose original meaning included the wider usage of behaving like an actor in the mime, as well as the narrower one of imitating, portraying, or representing. Later, at the time of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle, it had come to mean artistic creation. If one accepts these philological claims, then rather than construing art as a reflection, it ought better to be understood as embodiment. Instead of making the art object into a kind of substitute at one remove from the experience outside of it, we recognize that art is continuous with that experience.

What this suggests, then, is that the significance of imitation lies in the notion implicit in *mimesis* that art is a skillful embodiment of what is present in experience, rendering into reality the living forms and qualities of experience rather than copying them in an insubstantial form. Art then can be taken to be a distillation, an intensification, a focusing on the directness of experience to which we ordinarily are not sharply attentive. The notion of intuition perhaps most clearly captures this perception of *mimesis* as embodiment, and by examining the varying facets of intuition, we may come to realize more fully how the artistic process engages the realities in experience. In the remainder of this essay I should like to explore freely a number of aspects of the experience of art which intuition may illuminate for us.

In tracing the dimensions of aesthetic intuition, it is unavoidable to falsify the subject. The primary virtue of a theory of embodiment lies in the fact that it does not admit of separation, and it is in the failure to recognize this that most theories of art go amiss. In one fashion or another, aesthetic theory has been reductive in its practice, operating by a logic of division. On the one hand, theories of art have attempted to show how art can be resolved into something more clearly understood, such as language, symbol, emotion, or verisimilitude, thus denying its distinctiveness by reducing it to a common denominator of culture. On the other hand, until recently it has been the main achievement of aesthetics to reserve art to its own special region by virtue of isolating the object and assigning to the viewer an attitude of disinterested contemplation. Thus by the tactic of keeping art cognitively indistinct and aesthetically separate, both the scholar and the appreciator have sought to tame the irrepressible nature of the enterprise.

Intuition, as we shall pursue it here, suggests a way out of this arithmetic of experience, for it
shows how it is impossible for art to be subdued by a tactic of reduction and division. Yet in a sense we shall unwillingly be risking a similar error.

There are many uses of intuition, and in commenting on them successively, it is important to realize that all these aspects combine in the fullness of our experience of art. One facet of intuition does not necessarily exclude, another, but all suggest some aspect in the landscape of aesthetic experience. To apply a well known metaphor, aesthetic theory is a map which, by removing itself from the terrain, represents abstractly the directness and continuity of the region of experience to be traveled.

Some features of intuition pervade all its facets. One is struck by the sharpness and clarity of experience, by the vividness with which we perceive in the realm of art. Perception may be subtle or subdued, but it is never dull (unless its force is that of dullness itself, in which case it is vividly dull, emphatically and overwhelmingly dull, as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*). Another pervasive trait of aesthetic intuition lies in its striking directness. When it is effective, art exhibits a forthrightness from which we cannot turn aside without turning away. Its impact, when once it is captured, is straightforward. Still another general aspect of aesthetic intuition lies in its character of intrinsic perception, dwelling on the properties of an object for the sake of their inherent qualities. Here is where the semantic theories of art go awry by assigning a mediating role to art. Art is never replaceable without being sacrificed; it is never an aesthetic means exclusively, although it may be a political or moral one. Perhaps the most useful characterization of this aspect of intuition lies in speaking of the presentational quality of art. In being immediately present, art exhibits its presence, and this compels a direct encounter in its perceptual realm. Anything less would constitute avoidance or evasion. These three traits, vividness, directness, and intrinsic perception, filter together through all the dimensions of aesthetic intuition and become general features that unify the aesthetic mode of experience. Yet it is possible to trace the intuitive impulse in art through various phases or manifestations, and it will illuminate the subject to explore them here.

One of them here is *sensory intuition*, which operates in art as a dwelling on perceptual qualities and detail. It is an awareness of present nuances but not a suggestion of exterior associations or meanings. It leads the eye, the ear, the hand across the surface of perceptual experience with delight in the touch more than the direction. Thus Prall describes aesthetic experience as "an experience of an object as apprehended delightfully...directly through the senses... Such experience is...the experience of the surface of our world directly apprehended...[I]t is characteristic of aesthetic apprehension that the surface fully present to sense is the total object of apprehension. We do not so much perceive an object as intuit its appearance." Sensory intuition is the cutting edge of consciousness, not the enemy of reason but its scout. It is the feeling arm of the intellect, perceiving
qualities which reason must grapple with and comprehend. Intuition here precedes understanding without replacing it: it is the eye without which reason is blind. Intuition, however, is not the synonym of impulse. It is not precipitous but freely open. It is not abrupt but sensitive, not deliberate but immediate.

There is some art which works largely in this region of sensory intuition. The Suprematist paintings of Malevich, the non-objective work of Kandinsky, the abstract expressionism of Rothko, the color field paintings of Ad Reinhardt, even the swirls of light and cloud and smoke of Turner and the shimmering sun-filled surfaces of Monet cause the eye to dwell on the subtle nuances of hue, on the blendings and twistings of undulating waves and masses of visual space. So too do the tonal qualities of Debussy and Ravel entice the ear with soft sounds of delicate blend and tumbling cascades of notes, hovering and gliding with an almost tactile caress as they bathe one in an atmosphere suffused with warmth, brilliance, or tenderness. Perhaps even the *nouveau roman* of Robbe-Grillet pursues this region of perceptual consciousness, where direction seemingly disappears in the multitude of passing observations of endless detail.

Intuition takes a sharply different appearance as it emerges in the realm of what Cassirer called living forms. "This fixation of the 'highest moments of phenomena' is neither an imitation of physical things nor a mere overflow of powerful feelings. It is an interpretation of reality--not by concepts but by intuitions, not through the medium of thought but through that of sensuous forms."vi Formal intuition involves an absorption in the dynamic aspect of form as it moves across space and time, in vertical and horizontal dimensions of experience. There is a penumbra of time and space that encloses the region that surrounds that which is directly present, and our awareness encompasses this in both memory and anticipation. Yet this is not an amorphous region but rather one that coheres in art in an awareness of gestalt. It includes but goes beyond what Bergson describes as continuous flux, pure mobility, movement itself in its very simplicity, duration that is lived.vii Rather it is Croce's intuition broad and complete, a total vision instead of a fleeting impression, sensation, feeling, impulse, or emotion. It is distinguished from these "as form from what is felt and suffered, from the flux or wave of sensation, or from the psychic matter; and this form, this taking possession, is expression."viii Formal intuition then is the *sense* of coherence, the consciousness of binding shape, the inevitability of succession and *sequence*, of progression and resolution. It is Croce's exact awareness in advance of execution it is the intuition of totality, of unity, at times of necessity.

Like its sensory manifestation, formal intuition predominates in certain arts and works. There is the movement of a line that, in its purest form evokes substance and encloses space, as in the bison incised on the cave wall in Altamira, the ink drawings and calligraphic bamboo paintings of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese art, the fragile figure drawing of an Ingres or a Degas. As the movement of
pattern, it emerges as design in the frieze of a Greek temple, the great colonnades that enclose the
decorated with the richly decorative patterns of costly oriental rugs. As the pattern of movement it is the
steady growth of a Bach fugue, the unfolding action of a drama, the sequential flow of gesture in dance.
As the coherence of shape, formal intuition is the precarious balance of a Mondrian, the apparent
symmetry of the Parthenon, the grid of Manhattan streets, the radii of Paris and Washington, the cluster
of houses around the European village church. In a multitude of appearances, "art...gives the intuition of
the form of things." ix

Often closely allied with this is creative intuition. This is not the intuition of which Maritain writes, a
grasping of the self and things in a knowledge that emerges in the spiritual unconscious. x Of that we shall
speak later under another name. Creative intuition as we understand it here is rather directive intuition,
that of the artist as he senses his way along, knowing before reason what feels right and what does not.
This could as easily be termed artistic intuition but for the fact that it is not the exclusive province of the
artist, for we all share it as the experience of art unfolds. It is the intuition of the creative process as it
gropes its way forward. This approaches the creation ex nihilo of God, and suggests why the artist is so
often likened to the Deity, who brings substance out of the void, order out of chaos. So too does the artist
perform the act of origination, evoking sound out of silence, shape out of formless or unordered
substance, the human condition out of words and gestures. Here art is not a finished object or a
completed process but rather a coming into being as the artist shapes his path and the appreciator
follows in the wonder of personal discovery. This is not yet a total vision; rather it is a cumulative one that
emerges from the working out of the materials of art. xi It is more what Bergson describes as entering into
"the concrete form of duration." xii

In the effort to describe the creative process, artists have often spoken the language of intuition. xiii
Thus Picasso claimed that “[t]he picture is not thought out and determined beforehand, rather while
it is being made it follows the mobility of thought..." xiv There is a strange quality of leading on and
slipping into place, a fascination with the coherence and the dynamic condition of the material itself, and
it is an awareness of this that often dominates the creative process.

As the complement of creative intuition stands appreciative intuition. Indeed, writers such as
Samuel Alexander and John Dewey have regarded them as inseparable, and intuition may indeed be
described as joining together the functions of both artist and perceiver. xv Appreciative intuition, or as it
may be termed, aesthetic intuition, reflects a merging of one’s consciousness with the art object.
Sometimes this is described as empathy, and the advocates of this view are responding to the same
appreciative engagement in art. Before the divisions between perceiver and object that are the dubious product of analysis, there is the intimate bond by which we engage with the object in experience.

Appreciative intuition appears in the beginnings of picture space, not at the surface of the painting but from the stance of the observer. It occurs in the way we are bathed in musical sound, for the very intangibility of music turns it into somewhat of an environmental art that surrounds us as we open our bodies to its influence. It is the functional unity of building and inhabitant, where each is essential to the workings of the other. It appears in the world of film into which we are absorbed until we cannot extricate ourselves except by physically wrenching ourselves away. This quality of being "turned on" by art is a condition of openness that carries with it a vulnerability to the features of aesthetic experience. Appreciative intuition comes with learning to identify that stance, that attitude, that element in art and its object that sets the whole thing into effective action, what painters call the "crying point" in a picture.

Still another facet of intuition is what we may call ontological intuition. Here we approach the transcendent character of art, that peculiar ability of art to embrace the world without the loss of itself. And it is here that we begin to return to that apparent paradox from which we began this inquiry--the free independence of art which finds its way strangely back into our experience of what is real, an awareness captured in the original notion of mimesis. It is in this respect that art approaches the fullness of its significance, for art is more than delight, more than an indwelling in the moment, more than movement reaching forward beyond itself, more even than the experience of the unity of perceiver and object, man and world. In ontological intuition we return, no, rather we stand once more on primeval ground, in the realm of magic and ritual, beyond mysticism but before myth, where the signification of things lie not in meaning but in perception, not in knowledge but in encounter.

One form that ontological intuition takes is in the perception of universality in poetic, plastic, and universal forms. The vital symbol which is the embodiment of such universality is here no longer symbolic but rather the token that holds within itself the totality of the type. This captures what is perhaps the meaning sought for in claims for the eternal character of art, for there is a persistence of the universal as it appears in its particular manifestations. It is Dürer's praying hands, Rembrandt's self-portraits, the obelisk; it is "To see the world in a grain of sand, And a heaven in a wild flower" (Blake).

Perhaps it is art which most fully exemplifies Aristotle's theory of the universal. Through experiencing the world of concrete individuals, we become common to many individuals. These universal characteristics, however, are inseparable from such individuals and do not subsist in an independent realm.
leads Aristotle to hold that the historian recounts what has happened, while the poet relates the kind of thing that may happen. For this reason, he maintains that poetry is more philosophical than history, since it tends to express the universal while history recounts the particular. xvii

Aristotle's abstractive view of poetry reflects the intellectualism that has dominated the history of western aesthetics, an attitude we cannot endorse. Yet at the same time his account suggests an important insight into the way poetry and drama achieve compelling force. Because actions in real life are complex and confused by chance and accident, the poet must choose the most revealing strands by keeping to more than the possible, more even than the credible outcome of character; he must pursue its compelling consequences. xviii So it is that in drama, in the novel, and even in film we recognize ourselves and others more clearly than in life, more truly than if alive. We do so, however, not merely because the events are plausible, because they might have taken place. In an artistic context plausibility is never convincing. Rather the event must reveal something about human character that is typical, and by being typical it is capable of including us.

There is another mode of ontological intuition related to this which pursues the same awareness from another direction: it is the notion of art as the embodiment of being. In attempting to articulate this, philosophers have been accused of obscurity if not confusion, and yet despite the difficulty in the attempt, this perception is both important and necessary. Indeed; to ignore it is to turn one's back on the deeper searchings of the artistic process, an effort which moves as a golden warp through the fabric of the history of the arts, sometimes gleaming on the surface, sometimes running beneath the transverse threads, but always supplying the continuity that holds the royal cloth together. This is what Maritain spoke of in describing the poet's intuition as a grasping of the union of his self and of things in the work of art. xix

It is this also which led Hofstadter to describe the spiritual truth of art in ontological terms:

A work of art is a fragmentary articulation of something that can never be fully articulated, but that lies at the ground of our being and demands utterance. It is the primal thrust of the will-to-be toward its own truth. In the very act of striving to order the chaos of visual phenomena into a necessary whole, the forces of the painter's being rise to articulation in vision, in a visual form that reflects to him something that has attained a complete, necessary existence. xx

Thus for Hofstadter, "Beauty is the appearance of truth being," xxxi and art an enterprise which articulates the unity of objective and subjective in an image for intuition. xxi Heidegger puts this aesthetic ontology more directly: "In the work of art the truth of what
is has set itself to work."xxiii Not only does the work reproduce the universal essence of things; it sets up a world. "Towering-up-within-itself the work discloses a world and keeps this world in a ruling position."xxiv And poetry, which Heidegger takes in an inclusive sense to embrace all the modes of art, "Poetry is the saga of the unconcealment of what is."xxv

These observations bring us to the final phase of this exploration of intuition in art, metaphysical intuition. Here we may take our cue from Buchler who, in recognizing that the actualities in the poetic realm are meaningful, acknowledges that they must, ipso facto, be somehow related to actualities in other regions of human life.xxvi And it is the nature of that relation that is at the same time most puzzling and most intriguing. Whatever less may be said of art, there is a sense in which art is revelatory. At times this may appear as a transcendence of knowledge, as in Santayana’s assertions that "intuition...sublimes knowledge into vision,"xxxvii and Parker’s claim that the value of art lies in its ability to master life sympathetically and preserve it in the imagination.

Yet these views place knowledge before art and regard art as a distillation of what we already understand. Let me suggest rather that the converse may perhaps be the case, that the condition of art is the condition of things before the institution of the cognitive process, that art operates in the realm of the non-judgmental, the pre-cognitive, the non-thetic by offering us a direct apprehension of the real.xxx It is typically the artist himself who relates this most directly, as when D.H. Lawrence contends that “The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment. And this perfected relation...is life itself, for mankind.”xxx The playwright Ossie Davis makes a similar comment on theater, which offers us “[t]he immediate, personal apprehension of truth--of the 'feel' of truth--about a thing, or a person, or a Situation.”xxxi

In a remarkable essay, “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” John Dewey expands the concept of experience far beyond its usual cognitive limits. . . ."Things," he postulates," . . .are what they are experiences as.xxxii Thus the specific question to be asked in each case is, what sort of concrete and determinate experience is occurring. From this is follows that "we have a contrast, not between Reality, but between different realms of experience.xxxiii More recently, Merleau-Ponty argued for a strikingly similar view.xxxiv

We may suggest, then, that the logical criterion of a singular reality does not apply in the aesthetic realm" and that here there are as many realities as there are experiences. Now if experience in its directness is primary, it cuts beneath all those discriminations by which we judge the propriety of experiences--as cognitively, morally, socially acceptable. And when
we do this we must set aside those tendentious distinctions which dismiss certain modes of experience in favor of others: cognitive over emotive, mental over physical, real over imaginary, true over illusory. By these discriminations, it is little wonder that art has been declassed on theoretical grounds, for when the metaphysical question is put, art nearly always is relegated to the secondary terms, which neatly remove it from important consideration. Who can take fantasy seriously?

If we turn to the ground of experience in its very primacy, we are led to conclusions that are surprising to conventional thought, for it suggests that art is at the very root of the real rather than its passing bloom, and that art inhabits the substance of reality rather than serving merely as its mirror. Hence it is said that the artist sees things as if for the first time, and thus more clearly, accurately, vividly, yes, truly more than others. In this act of primacy, art returns to its primitive ground--primeval in history and primary in perception.

We thus come full circle from whence we began, for here in metaphysical intuition lies the secret of mimesis. By reaching into an experience whose realism is of no account, we discover in art a reality whose significance is profound. It is here that the living forms, qualities, and movements of experience are rendered real, captured before they have crystallized into the commonplace, and embodied in an aesthetic field which joins art, artist, and perceiver in an experiential unity. Art thus works in the realm of the real as it is perceived directly and without judgment. Through our intuitive apprehension in all its modes, we encounter in the truth of art the reality of the human world. The myth of Pygmalion may well narrate the discovery of the "artistes' stone." Unlike the alchemical philosopher who engages in a futile quest for a substance that will change base metals into gold or silver, the artist searches with more success for one that will transform the inanimate into life itself.

There is no art which does not in some fashion invoke this process. In the gesture of dance, the line, color, and mass of painting, the volume of sculpture, the dynamic sound of music, the plot and action of drama, human reality takes on substance and shape. Yet the art which most readily engages us in this process with disarming ease but striking completeness is the art of film. Film possesses all the perceptual dimensions of the ordinary world, and thus creates the very conditions of experience. It fashions a reality out of the time and space, yet these are so joined to one another as to be inseparable and indistinguishable. It was this that led Panofsky to speak of the “dynamization of space” and the “spatialization of time” in film, each shaped and perceived through the modalities of the other. To these should be added the awareness created in film through the movements by which the human participant engages in his world. Moreover, within the reality dimensions of this “transcendental aesthetic” of time, space, and movement there lies the full range of perceptual experience, thought
sensory realization in the visual image, in sound, and in kinesthetic awareness, and through dramatic realization in plot and dialogue. Thus in film we are drawn with surprising involuntariness into a perceptual reality a silent participant. We live in the film; to leave it requires that we tear ourselves away by destroying the perceptual world of the film, and we can do this only by closing out eyes, hiding our head, or leaving the theater.

As metaphysical intuition becomes the embodiment of reality, so it is the focal point of all the phases of intuition we have reviewed here—sensory, formal, creative, appreciative, and ontological. It may in fact be said that all these modes of intuition lead to and coalesce in metaphysical intuition so as to create the strangely real presence of art. Here art and life join and interpenetrate, so that the world gives substance and significance to the arts, and they in turn leave the rest of experience chastened and clearer, more direct and intense, and thus more inescapably real. Herein lies the wonder of art, that it creates reality through perception rather than deed, and that it transforms the world by the force of its spell rather than the strength of its force. What greater autonomy could one wish for, and what greater influence can one wield?

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i Cf. A. Berleant, The Aesthetic Field (Springfield, Ill.: C.C. Thomas, 1970), Ch. 2, "Surrogate Theories of Art."


iii G. Sorbom, Mimesis and Art (Upsala,- 1966).


ix E. Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p. 184


 xvii *Aristotle, Poetics*, ch. 9.


xix Cf. supra, p. 11.


xxi Ibid., p. 169


xxiv Ibid., p. 671.

xxv Ibid., p. 695.


xxx "Immorality and the Novel, II in *Phoenix*. 


Cf. also A. Berleant, The Aesthetic Field, pp. 114-117.


Erwin Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the motion Picture,” Critique I, No. 3, 1947