The social role of art

The belief that art stands independent of the social process and that the artist is free from the obligations and standards that are part of the cultural ethos is both misguided in theory and false in fact. Yet the claim of freedom for art, not for artists alone but for the functioning of the aesthetic sphere of culture, captures the vital core of that activity. This is because the arts have the ability to engage us in experience that is rich in perceptual awareness and in resonance of meaning, and such experience always has a social aspect and social content. What the arts offer society in achieving this experience, however, can only be realized when artists are free to pursue their own course, to explore their creative perceptions and to embody them in their work. The value of a work of art, then, has a social dimension, yet it leads to a paradoxical conclusion: Only when art is free from social constraint can it make its unique social contribution.

I begin with the admission, therefore, that the romantic doctrine, art pour l'art, is not only no longer true; it has never been true. As an expression of resolve, this apothegm was a powerful slogan for the autonomous and searching spirit of the nineteenth century artist. And as compelling rhetoric in the service of artistic freedom, it continues to be forceful. However, the proclamation that art must be free of social constraints and that the artist should be unencumbered by obligations to the surrounding society mistakes the condition of artistic and
aesthetic activity for its essence. Art must function freely to fulfill its social role.

How can art and artist be both autonomous and inseparable from the network of social processes? Aren't these incompatible conditions? Not exactly, for while the arts are an integral part of the social order, their social value, I want to argue, rests on the preservation of artistic freedom. Under such a condition the arts not only make their unique contribution and demonstrate their distinctive value, but this curious circumstance provides a basis on which to evaluate the individual work of art. We arrive, then, at an unanticipated consequence: The more completely art is encouraged to pursue its own course, to follow its inherent direction, the more successfully will the arts be able to make their distinctive contribution to social life. The rest of this chapter is an elaboration and defense of that claim.

The value of art as a social institution

Philosophic inquiry is probably most unsettled in the domains of value. Normative questions, especially when they concern the arts, remain notoriously unresolved. Without the constraints on belief that the natural world imposes, lacking the necessity for the traditions and institutions of social life that enable a community to survive and prosper, art and its activities appear to follow only impulse and fancy, assuming as many shapes as the revelers in a Hallowe’en parade—and in forms as imaginative and bizarre. Some would say that this is a picture of the arts of our day, where experimentation, change, and the cult of originality dominate the exhibition, performance, and even the economics of contemporary work. Is there a rational thread that binds this social process, a layer of authenticity that lies behind the exaggeration and caricature? Or are we left with an entertaining display that offers only a flashing surface to attract a capricious public?

One of philosophy's contributions to such a situation lies in the clarification of issues. Although this is not the only or even the main goal of philosophy, clarity and order are surely appropriate here, for it is easy to confound the many loci of value in the field of artistic and aesthetic activity. What might some of them be?
We speak of value most commonly in talking about the art object. How successful a work is Michael Graves’s *Humana Building* in Louisville, a luxurious post-modern marble edifice of classical spaces and motifs? What makes any architectural work outstanding? A late Rembrandt self-portrait profound? The Berg *Violin Concerto* transcendentally beautiful? What, in short, makes any art object a good or great one?

This first of all questions, however, must receive the last of all answers. As compelling as the judgment on an individual work may seem, it is really the final phase in a logical sequence. Other issues need to be identified and other questions must first receive a response: Before judgment comes criticism and, with criticism, comes that complex tissue of information and guided perception that leads to finer discernment and informs critical judgment. A third normative concern, moreover, precedes the critical function, for until we have some sense of the place of art in the social geography, we cannot comment with confidence on so thoroughly valuational an activity as the artistic. What function does art perform among the many activities of individuals and their institutions that come together in the construction of community life? What is the peculiar contribution of the arts that finds the aesthetic a pervasive feature of every human society in its historic and even its archaic forms?

The criticism of art, then, presupposes that we accept its objects and activities as somehow important in human society. If art were not of critical interest, it would mean that we had no concern with it and that art made not the slightest difference. Its importance, then, rests on its social function, even though that function does not determine its value. And with the recognition of the social function of art comes the need to evaluate *that* activity. Furthermore, the stratum underlying art conceived as a social institution is the rich medium of creative and appreciative activity that makes up the domain of artistic-aesthetic experience. Art works are still the product of individual decisions and actions and our appreciative encounter with them is a personal event. Experience, then, is both the source of all value and its manifestation.

We have here a realm suffused with value, and it provides us with a normative, circular order of subsumption: Value is inherent in our creative and appreciative experience of the arts,
and such experience becomes the ground of evaluation. Yet evaluation rests on a critical process and criticism is a social function that takes place in a cultural context. Finally, all of these – creation, appreciation, and evaluation – stand under the kind of reciprocally productive-experiential activity we call by the shorthand term ‘art’. While these are general issues, they meet at our direct engagement with the arts.

Let me mention here a pivotal factor that makes evaluation in art vastly different from, say, judgment in law. Conformity to precedent has long been unfashionable in the arts: While it is a sound guide in legal decisions, it is the kiss of death in artistic ones. However we may account for the evolution of the arts, the history of artistic change offers a key to their special character rather than a troublesome source of confusion or inconsistency. Whether key or confusion, change (which is not, of course, to be identified with improvement) is a basic fact in the arts and one of their most salient characteristics. How are we to judge music produced not by a performer on an instrument but directly by the composer on tape, using electronically generated sounds produced by a music synthesizer? What are we to make of post-modern architecture, employing stylistic features of earlier periods to provide decorative surfaces? The list is as intriguing as it is long: sculpture as earth art that rearranges large areas of the earth's surface, ‘language writing’ that refashions words into half-understandable shapes and combinations that bristle with an unsettling oddness and suggestive but elusive connotations, painting that returns to representation but with a vengeful attitude toward the image or an irreverent commentary on past masters. Judgment here seems to founder on new materials, new forms, new attitudes.

This, then, is the underlying landscape in which aesthetic value appears. Even with recognizing its features, there is more here than we can traverse in a single journey. Let me follow just one of several possible directions: the value that lies in the social function of art. We may grasp that function more clearly by focusing again on critical judgment and its place in the larger social process.
The social evaluation of the art process

The criticism and evaluation of art objects are appealing for obvious reasons. Surely we are interested in good art and we want to understand how and why works of art achieve that status. The critic plays a role in this, more often, unfortunately, as a judge of the object than as a guide to effective ways of appreciating it. So it is that both the practice of criticism and the critique of its practice account for most of the activity concerning aesthetic value: The critic comments on the work of art, the scholar comments on the critic, and the public pays the consequences, both literally in the price of art objects and in their prestige and accessibility, which may be aspects of the same thing.

Some have held, however, that the public is more than the unwitting victim of criticism. It may, in fact, be the final arbiter in this curious situation. Aristotle was only the first to hold that, in literature, the masses are the best judge in the long run. He has been followed by others — critics, artists, and philosophers — who have suggested that the critic can make a contribution here, less as a judge than as a guide to experiencing the work and who have placed final judgment in the hands of the appreciator. Northrup Frye observes somewhere that the critic represents ‘the reading public at its most expert and judicious’, and as its surrogate the critic is the public’s exemplar, not its legislator. ‘It is the task of the public critic’, Frye continues, ‘to exemplify how a man of taste uses and evaluates literature, and thus show how literature is to be absorbed into society’. Even Marcel Duchamp, who has probably spawned more critical commentary than any other artist, once wrote that ‘in the last analysis, the artist ... will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity include him in the primers of art history’. He asserted, moreover, that ‘the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act’. It is toward this end that the critic can make a contribution, less as a judge than as a guide to experiencing the work. In discussing the function of criticism, T.S.
Eliot claimed that interpretation is not so much interpretation as it is a means of supplying the reader with facts he would likely have missed. Others like Blackmur, Hampshire, and Isenberg have taken the critic’s role to be assisting the public in experiencing an art work aesthetically.

In considering the practice of criticism, it is relatively straightforward to examine the traits of a good critic, as Hume and others have done. And it is a direct matter to inquire into the characteristics of a good or successful work of art. While these appear to be relatively straightforward questions, they are by no means easy to resolve, and proposals to settle them are the perennial subject of aesthetics. Yet I am searching for the resolution of a normative issue that is more basic still — the evaluation of aesthetic activity, that process of artists practicing their crafts, art publics engaging with art objects in appreciative experience, and the objects themselves carrying on their active role in the social process.

Moreover, the fact that we are most inclined to judge the value of art objects obscures a normative dimension that is logically prior: the value of artistic/aesthetic activity, itself. For it is not the motives, techniques, styles of working of the artist, nor is it the features of the art object or the causes, conditions, and effects of its production, but rather the function of the process as a whole that is the underlying ground of aesthetic value. The fundamental normative issue is, then, not the criticism of art objects, as such, but the social evaluation of the art process, the evaluation of art's social function. And this rests, in turn, on the valuational experience in our aesthetic engagement with the arts.

Taking this tack may bring us to see the role of Frye's public critic as a model participant in the social process of art and not primarily as a critic at all. Public criticism guides public perception and so serves a social purpose by bringing people to experience art that may be new and different but perhaps only unfamiliar. It is at this point that collective experience becomes the touchstone for determining the lasting value of an art object. Ultimately, its success lies in its effectiveness in experience, and the experience of the art public over time becomes its proving ground. This criterion is appropriately vague, for there is a plurality of art publics, from audiences for the esoteric to those broadly appreciative of only the most conventional of works.
and performances. The experiential standard is borne out historically, however, in the common acknowledgment of a body of art works and traditions whose value has widespread acceptance.\textsuperscript{5} For all its variability, experience is the ultimate test.\textsuperscript{6}

There is yet a further dimension to this historical process: While experience in the arts is most basic, the art work, itself, has a social function. This aspect of art tends to be neglected in Western aesthetics, and the recent history of the arts, in fact, appears to display a course of involution. For at the same time that the autonomy of art was asserted as an essential characteristic, its scope contracted until, in the late twentieth century, it has come in some cases to dwell upon itself, reaching a stage of self-consciousness at which art has turned into a kind of philosophical commentary.

**Art’s social functions**

Yet even from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, when the arts apparently pursued their own internal development, they nonetheless contributed quietly to many of the social processes of which the arts have always been a part. While music acts differently from painting, and theater from architecture, these, along with the other arts, carry out many similar social functions. Central among these functions is their power to alter perception and redefine the range of possible experience, effects that inspired Wilde’s unforgettable quip about life’s imitating art. We still stand in the light of Guardi's Venice and the French countryside of Corot. We blink in the sunshine of impressionism. The stark geometrism of Cubism, the Bauhaus, and Le Corbusier's International Style generated an urban environment that is only now being felt as barren and oppressive. Cézanne's eyes saw a different world from Giotto's, the vision of Turner and Monet was vastly unlike that of Rembrandt and de la Tour. One might think of the Brecht-Weill *Three Penny Opera* as embodying a cynicism and disillusionment similar to Berg's *Lulu*, both of them an age removed from the *Magic Flute* or *Don Giovanni* in which a benign or vengeful divinity was still a believable force in human events. Theater need not be overtly
didactic, as nineteenth century melodrama was, to succeed in sensitizing us to the subtle intricacies of social relations, themselves bound tightly to the conventions of age and culture. Along with changed and deepened perceptual experience, the social role of the arts includes accustoming people to unfamiliar ideas, actions, and events, generating sentiment, and cultivating sensibility. It is, of course, part of my thesis that such connections with the social world are an invariable accompaniment of artistic-aesthetic activity.

A curious discovery appears, moreover, when we realize that the art process in its social function itself resembles creative activity. Just as the artist may move intuitively in fashioning the art object, so artists as participants in a society act with a collective intuition to aid in discovering new social perceptions, directions, and goals. Artists, to borrow D.H. Lawrence's phrase, are ‘the antennae of the race’ and this contribution gives art a social value. In participating in this process, art objects acquire value. The social evaluation of a work of art rests, then, on how it contributes to the development and enhancement of perceptual consciousness, consciousness that is always bound to history and culture. While not the only source of artistic value, the social domain is always present as an important factor.

Painting the history of the arts with a broad brush brings out that social process in striking ways. For not only do the arts perform a social function by their internal processes, they often come to exemplify the very societies they serve. Panofsky, for example, has established convincingly that Gothic architecture embodied the spiritual aspirations of medieval Europe. So powerfully did it succeed that we define the mentality of this age by that very style and, until well into the twentieth century, Gothic remained the preferred architectural form for a vision that is governed by the guiding perceptions of supernatural religion. In talking about influence, I am not asserting a causal relation here between artistic form and social ethos. The Gothic cathedral did not create the otherworldly focus of medieval society, nor did the social forms and religious convictions of that period produce the architectural style that expresses its character. A social order and its art are rather both part of the same whole – a cultural process in which religion and art join with other forces, institutions, and practices in the ongoing life of a culture to form its
distinctive character. It is the congruity of these factors that illuminates the role of the arts in providing a perceptual focus for the social ethos.

The eighteenth century had its own signal characteristics that we may find mirrored in Rameau's codification of musical practice into the diatonic system. With its tertiary harmonies and tonic-dominant key relations, the tonal system can be taken as an exemplification of the sense of rational order that was the guiding spirit of the time. There is compelling logic in the auditory force that presses us to modulate to distant tonal regions through successive fifths and back to the key note of a composition. This is a stable rational order, found equally in the physics of the overtone series and in the mathematics of the planetary system. The same perception of the rational order of parts into a whole pervades both art and culture of that period.

The spirit of our own time is, of course, hardly singular; in fact, it seems deliberately to defy a clear identity. Successive movements in the arts display a fugitive spirit, shifting from one stance to another. While as unstable as other aspects of modern culture, they are neither transparent nor insignificant but insistent witnesses to this age. Impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, and their many successors are movements that enlisted not just painting but music, sculpture, theater, architecture, and film in reflecting and guiding the evanescent sense of our unstable times. The arts have moved from a perceptual fascination with light and color and the geometrical structure of volumes to increasing subjectivity, deliberate absurdity, and self-referentiality.

At the same time we have become increasingly self-conscious, not just in our art but in the guiding ideas and movements of our age. In its painfully groping efforts at avoiding global destruction, the doctrine of peaceful coexistence, to take one example, requires a degree of self-awareness that is emerging only too slowly in political leaders. The arts are pressed to the extreme in encouraging that process. As in the larger culture, they may work beyond rationality, from a deeply intuitive response to the absurdity of reasoning that itself becomes a parody of the rational mind: abstractions like megadeaths for calculating the effects of alternative scenarios for ‘limited’ nuclear war, the half-life of nuclear waste measured in ten-thousand-year increments,
the Holocaust and other attempts at ethnic extermination, or the prospect of an aids plague on a
global scale.

When they take on these themes, our arts may become arts of despair, of chaos, of utter
disorder, of illusion, irony, and escape: the graphic character of the art of Kollwitz and Pollack,
the perceptual subjectivity of abstract expressionism and color field painting, the coupling of
focused rationality with intense emotionalism in the serial music of Alban Berg, the nostalgia of
post-modern architecture. The examples are endless in number and overwhelming in variety, a
mirror for the world of our own day.

These cases do not establish the fact that the arts anticipate the development of
awareness; they assert only that the arts embody it. Certainly the range of consciousness at any
one time extends from the benighted to the prescient. Yet it is because art brings us to the point
of presence, to a state of awareness and confrontation, that it has social power, something
censors have always recognized. The larger value of the arts lies precisely in that power. Insofar
as art has the capacity to bring us to see, to hear, to grasp the sense of things, it serves the human
cause.

The social value of art

It is here that we discover the social value of art. Unlike moral philosophy, art that is outstanding
does not typically reinforce the status quo. Unlike supernatural religion, it does not encourage
acquiescence or contentment. Unlike social doctrine, secular or religious, it does not lead us to
direct action. These and other centers of value in human culture have their own function and
their own rationale, but they are not those of art. The value of the arts lies in their special
capacity for creating experience, for confronting us with the multiple layers of awareness in
sensation, in meaning, in action.

Art works directly; it confronts us with an undeniable presence. Yet its force comes from
an internal process. When the arts function with autonomy, both in the larger social order and for
us as individuals, their value is realized, not as a consequence of artistic activities but in their very workings. Here is a domain of human culture that possesses its own primacy and whose contribution comes about through its self-direction. That is why the arts fulfill their social function best when not charged with a social mission. Enthrall art and it becomes vapid, effete, a pandering confirmation of the obvious and the common or the lackey of ideology. Encourage the openness of art and it becomes a means of enlightenment and so, in Spinoza's profound sense, of freedom.

Recognizing this region of aesthetic value, we discover the grounds for evaluating art. An art that leads to illumination, to a greater range of perceptual consciousness and a more powerful grasp of the human world of a particular time and place, is a strong art. Art that obscures our vision, that induces us to lethargy, or that panders to us with shallow contentment is art that has forfeited its social value. If the truth of a time be bitter, then its art must be bitter.

What can we say, then, about the art of decline, degenerate art that seduces us to disaffection or depravity? What about art that threatens social stability and established values? Plato's fears persist still. Yet the same principle holds. Let a hundred flowers be planted and the most compelling will be plucked to hang before us, if not in one season then in the next. Mill's arguments for the social value of freedom of discussion and opinion apply equally to the arts. When political or religious institutions dictate to art, however, they diminish its unique force by undermining its autonomy. Social control emasculates art by subverting its social function and, in so doing, sacrifices the very social value that art possesses. My conclusion, then, is paradoxical: The social value of the arts is greatest when they follow their own genius free of social and political constraints. And their success in engaging us in the world of their time and place is the mark of that value.

From the broadest perspective, then, the evaluation of art does not lie in the power of critics or the judgments of critical scholarship. That claim is plausible only when we fragment the art process, exploding it into a thousand discrete acts of creation, performance, and judgment. We need to go beyond that atomistic model, itself an obsolete survival of the eighteenth century
world view. As a social institution integrated into the context of human culture, art makes a special contribution. Yet seeing art whole does not submerge the individual’s creative act and object. It makes them more powerful still, since each can add its distinctive voice to the human chorus and affect the quality of the total sound.

The evaluation of art as a social institution, then, is a different matter from the judgment of an individual art object. When we take a social perspective on artistic/aesthetic activity, we begin to recognize the conditions under which the arts work best. By pursuing their own course, by directing their forms through the internal momentum and thrust of their ideas and materials, by valuing those glimmers of sensibility and intuition that precede formulas and doctrines, artists are most able both to develop their creative capacities and to make their distinctive social contribution. Forces that act from without to direct the activities of art--political, economic, social, religious, ideological forces--constrict and thereby diminish this creative spring of human culture. Particular works, artists, styles, and movements, then, all provide their greatest social offering in an open setting. In judging the relation of art to society, the success of the one becomes a condition for the success of the other.
NOTES


5. In The Aesthetic Field (Springfield, IL: C.C. Thomas, 1970), Ch. 5, I argued, too, for the critic as primarily an educator in aesthetic experience and not as the judge of a work.

6. While this discussion centers on the high arts of a society, it can be taken and adapted without prejudice to the folk arts and the popular arts mutatis mutandis.