

Critique of the Artist

(2012)

The preferred contemporary mode of artistic creation is characterized by a rapidity and ease (even outsourcing) of construction, an absence of boundaries, a focus on the sonic or visual veneer, and increasingly variable references—in other words, the model given to us by the internet and related technologies. There are, of course, many exceptions to this trend, but in spite of being a creative field, a general uniformity of thought exists. As artists are increasingly encouraged by arts organizations and larger social dynamics to become socially relevant and involved, artistic thought tends to further converge. The current model of the artist as community leader, innovator, educator, activist and globally connected citizen can be detrimental to the development of a singular and critical perspective. As the social aspects of art are over-emphasized, more of our creativity disappears into marketable forms of entertainment or spaces of passive political and cultural critique. There is a growing focus on egoistic expressions of one's self and forms of narrative particularism (*"I'm going to tell my story"*). This content often takes form through material developments and presentational novelty that create the appearance of something progressive. Accompanying these prevailing trends is a growing conviction in the primary importance of the artist's person. It points to a receding horizon of thought concerning the possibility of truth and universality in artistic creation.

There is a good deal of pressure and incentive for today's artists to cultivate a personal style and story, to develop their niche – something to identify themselves in an ever growing and anonymizing world. This self-seeking individuality and "space of one's own" is promoted by contemporary art programs, grants, and institutions who capitalize on its marketability. It represents an inward shift of concern, away from the burden of the long and complex traditions and histories of the various mediums. Style, the perceived surface of a composition, shouldn't necessarily be cultivated to fit a preconceived fashionable aesthetic. It should be an unavoidable consequence of how you best realize and revise ideas within the context of a composition or performance. A large part of many musics' traditions are rooted in the religious or sacred realms, contemplations of a divine order of things or expressions of a universal idea. The strength and beauty of this conception of art lies not in its religious particulars, but in its reaching toward a truth beyond the individual. It is a worthy task of every generation of artists to redefine what form a universal artistic truth may take and how it may be illuminated within their contemporary context.

Two trends seem to dominate the character of most contemporary works. The first is defined by pure excess, gestural provocation, sexuality, a violent fascination with the body, and a forceful, though often impotent, energy. There is little need to illustrate examples of this, it is everywhere you look or listen. In its gratuity, it should compel the artist toward a new principle of asceticism (I think of Beckett's writing). The second trend is defined by a restless invention of resources and forms of presentation: in music, sound synthesis and sonic distribution; in visual art, going beyond the frame, expansion of materials, and the experience of installations; in film/video, development of 3D and interactive media; and multimedia projects¹ at large. There is great potential for progress

in these new developments, but in current practice, most of the projects are undemanding and passive escapes for the audience into a dizzying display of stimulation and sensation. They distract us with their variety of forms without constructing any coherent thought. With its insatiable desire for the next form of pleasure, it should compel the artist toward a new principle of sustained and focused investigation, stability and permanence (I think of the architecture of Louis Kahn). These trends are two sides of the same coin, uniting man's Dionysian energy with his continually displaced desire. Though there are plenty of great works that fit this model, it leans to the past and appears as an exhausted or tamed Romanticism.

We are beginning to see the work's transformation into the artist²—his body, personae, culture, lifestyle and speech. New technologies are beginning to seamlessly integrate themselves with the human, fusing media and man. The danger is in producing a circularity that manifests itself in an art that only recreates an image of the existing world, re-presenting ourselves and our transient, prescribed desires. Artistic invention comes from the necessary struggle to evade, revise and subtract oneself. The idea of art as the expression of one's "self" is a confused notion. In any case, in communicating through a work of art, if one wishes to communicate *something*, one must bear in mind that there is no certainty of correspondence, even if in verbal accord. The binding effects of music, for example, are imaginary—agreements on things to which we have no reliable access³.

Every artist is humbled, inspired and transfigured by their perceived relation and indebtedness to peers and predecessors. A work, however revolutionary it may be, comes from another work, a shared line of thought. The artist remains, most importantly, as a facilitator in the construction of a set of evolving ideas. The work need not be about global peace, marginalized communities, multiculturalism, or victims of some injustice. It need not be heroically political or sympathetically social, nor must it be a personal confession. It should, at least, point beyond us toward an idea.

1. I actually quite enjoy many multimedia (or mixed medium) projects. I only notice that they, very often, try to satisfy the audience with a diversity of distractions, the excitement and novelty of the experience making up for otherwise insubstantial individual components. Schoenberg wrote, "In the ballet, music should hide the noise of the steps." In this thoroughly modern conception, the instance of combining the arts (music and dance) serves only to further differentiate the two. In other words, the music purifies the art of ballet by eliminating the extraneous noise of the steps, thereby consolidating its visual effect.

2. The opposite also holds true: the incorporation of the subject into song. Is this not precisely the allure of the mythological sirens? It is not the intrinsic beauty of their music that is so intensely attractive, but their ability to sing the innermost desire of the subject entranced. Everyone has their own siren song, it is the sonic arrangement of complete orgasmic fulfillment that resonates with each individual person as they are accordingly acoustically conditioned.

3. Metzinger, T. 2009 *The Ego Tunnel*: 'Many things you can express by way of music (or other art forms, like dance) are ineffable, because they can never become the content of a mental concept or be put into words. On the other hand, if this is so, sharing the ineffable aspects of our conscious lives becomes a dubious affair: we can never be sure if our communication was successful; there is no certainty about *what* actually it was we shared.'