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Art, Cognition, Knowledge, and Diagnostics

Art as a Form of Cognition and Knowledge

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It is an obvious truth that art has a cognitive value, whether it appears in the form of the cognitive function or as a form of truth. Truth is one of the key concepts of modern and modernist art. In modernist art it doesn't refer to what we see in its immediacy but to what exists behind the representation – a hidden or implied reality, which points back at some truth of the outer or phenomenal world. To explain this question of truth and reality one would have to go back to Hegel and his *Phenomenology of Spirit* which, not surprisingly, was not only one of the main philosophical products of romanticism but also one of the sources of the Frankfurt School (and of many of those – Ernst Bloch for example – who defended twentieth-century avant-garde art).

Let us consider the view that between art with a small and with a capital 'A', and between art and culture, there is a dimension of fluctuation. Works, trends, styles, and genres are transformed, and drift in and out of the contemporary meaning of the common denominator 'art'. Despite this, however, art has some claim to an essential function and role in human existence and is not just an object of sales and of ideological manipulations. It is one of the main means for attaining that distance towards oneself or towards a real or mental object, which

at the same time, engenders consciousness of the existence of the designated object and of the distance itself, all this happening especially in matters of an existential nature. Given these points, can we then claim that this paramount function involves the attainment or presentation of truth – pertaining to human being or that of society or, indeed, both?

If we define art as an artefact or activity which provides a specific existential experience, this necessarily concerns some sort of 'truth'. It can be in the shape of 'authenticity', 'immediacy', of the beautiful with its links to the good and the true, or it can be, for example, an Althusserian 'aesthetic effect' which 'makes ideology visible' in spite of being a form of ideology itself. In short, in aesthetics and areas related to theory and philosophy of art, truth of a certain kind plays almost always a central role. This truth can be of different kinds. The way in which I would apply the term would be to describe the 'truth' offered by art through artistic experience as a form of 'recognition' which can apply to material and spiritual as well as to figurative and abstract works. As such it depends upon the experience of this 'recognition'. A criterion for determining whether this recognition is warranted or not is the broader context of the artwork and our own perceptiveness and insight. This applies to works of 'Art'. Works of 'art' do not fit this description and, rather, declare an 'objecthood'. They do not possess the 'truth' in question. The exception to this is if we designate the distance created between, let us say, a certain material or object which was designated as an artwork and our consciousness of its unique existence (as occasioned by the work being placed in a specific context). The establishment of such a mode of 'objecthood' might be seen as a certain truth of this very material or object. I would, however, strongly disagree with such a view, for when speaking of truth, we apply the term to a relation.

The tradition of the Frankfurt School (which in many places is still the dominant tradition) views avant-garde art as the basic instance of expressing truth. In this respect its view is just the contrary of, say, Georg Lukács:

'The modern literary schools of the imperialist era, from Naturalism to Surrealism, which have followed each other in such swift successions, all have one feature in common. They all

take reality exactly as it manifests itself to the writer and the characters he creates. The form of this immediate manifestation changes as society changes. These changes, moreover, are both subjective and objective, depending on modifications in the reality of capitalism and also on the ways in which class struggle and changes in class structure produce different reflections on the surface of that reality. It is these changes above all that bring about the swift succession of literary schools together with the embittered internecine quarrels that flare up between them.

But both emotionally and intellectually they all remain frozen in their own immediacy; they fail to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate their experience to the hidden social forces that produce them. On the contrary, they all develop their own artistic style – more or less consciously – as a spontaneous expression of their immediate experience.¹

In his latter comparison of Kafka and Thomas Mann, and in the case of his criticisms of expressionism, Lukács sees such 'avant-garde' works as prisoners of their own blindness – of an immediacy which prohibits them from seeing below the surface. Thus the very feature which (according to Adorno or Walter Benjamin for example) is the merit of avant-garde art, is, in Lukács' opinion, its main drawback. Not to point to the distortion of the depicted social reality but to show it in its immediacy is not a virtue but a failure. Art should tell and present the global social truth according to its means and possibilities, and not be the victim of the distorted class society. This 'truth' is something very different from that which the avant-garde artists had in mind. They referred not to the truth of class society (even if they believed in it) but to an *idea* of artistic truth hidden either within the objective world itself, or in society on its microlevel of individual experiences. Ideology and instrumental reason is, looking from a contemporary distance, something far removed from their endeavours. This does not mean, though, that many of them did not have such general aspirations. Indeed, politicized avant-gardes like futurism or constructivism were to a large extent built

¹ Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 36–37.

on such desires. Nevertheless, such works usually contain another facet which not only balances the first but, by counterpoising it, attains an aesthetic effect typical for an artwork. The works of Malevich or El Lissitzky are good examples of this unique artistic device.

By ascribing to art (in Lukács' case, mainly literature) the role of a truth-teller of society, his whole aesthetic project is here to affirm the *social* function of art. Art is one of the three spheres which shows the truth of a society, with science and philosophy being the other two. The basis for such a view is 19th century realism: 'Realism is ... the basis for all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but *Falsism*. When our painters represent peasants with regular features and irreproachable linen; when their milkmaids have the air of Keepsake beauties, whose costume is picturesque, and never old or dirty; when Hodge is made to speak refined sentiments in unexceptionable English, and children utter long speeches of religious and poetic enthusiasm; ... an attempt is made to idealize, but the result is simply falsification and bad art. ... Either give us true peasants, or leave them untouched; either paint no drapery at all, or paint it with the utmost fidelity; either keep your people silent, or make them speak the idiom of their class.'¹

The opinion just quoted is somewhat different from the view that Lukács requires of realism, but this is so because the statement above concerns mainly painting and Lukács' mainly literature. The partisan credo to present in art 'typical characters in typical situations' does sound vulgar, but in the 19th century, before the appearance of socialist realism, it had no political consequences as it did in the middle of this century. Still, art of the realist kind fulfilled a rather specific social function. When its time had passed and society changed, a lot of that art passed away also. Or rather, it became a chapter in the history of styles (and significant forms). The works which retained their artistic value and importance were those which did not simply apply the principles of realism, but at the same time transgressed their depicted immediacy. They thus attained and retained an artistic and not only a documentary relevance. In this sense artistically successful realism was

¹ G.H. Lewes, writing on *Realism in Art* in 1858, quoted in Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 35.

actually just using a different *technique* to 'capture presence'. But can this 'presence' be universalized? Or is it true, as Linda Nochlin claims (when comparing a painting by Manet and another by Goya) that '[f]or the Realist horror – like beauty or reality itself – cannot be universalized: it is bound to a concrete situation at a given moment of time.'¹ Now, this may be true as far as depiction of an event is concerned; nevertheless as soon as we try to comprehend the event and identify with it a universalization occurs, otherwise the artwork would remain 'on the other side': no communication, no transfer of meaning would occur.

Needless to say, much of the discussion about realism in this century has been political. For example, in the sixties Roger Garaudy proposed the thesis of 'realism without boundaries',² according to which all contemporary art was realist in some sense.

Art shows a certain truth by depicting the historical and social world and its events. It is one of many possible truths. In different historical periods it captures the presence of these worlds and also their essence, if the artists see one. It also shows existential truths which involve the aforementioned 'recognitions'. Such truths are not experienced on huge canvasses showing numbers of people but always individually, even if these individuals are but details of a larger picture. Many attempts to build 'frescoes' have perhaps succeeded in presenting a certain 'truth' or presentation of the depicted historical events, but all had to rely upon individual characters, destinies and events to supply 'flesh' for the broader 'truths' they strived to present. This applies equally to fine arts, literature, or cinema.

At the same time art shows also another truth: its material truth, its nature of an object made from different materials, exhibited, and sold. Also, an artwork shows what Walter Benjamin would call a 'trace': that unique presence of authenticity which could just as well be found in real objects and remnants invested with meaningful potential, but which is much more accessible in certain artworks or just plain works. 'When Benjamin looks at a photographic portrait what fascinates him is precisely not the composed aura of stillness and distance in

¹ Nochlin, *Ibid.*, p. 32.

² Roger Garaudy, *D'un réalisme sans rivages* (Paris: Plon, 1963).

which the subjects bathe, but those stray, tell-tale irreducible symptoms of “reality” that flicker on its edges – symptoms which, in linking the photographer’s present to a putative “real” future for its subjects, constrain us, viewing the photographed past from the future, into constellating our own present time with its.’¹

If the orthodox Marxist theory – of Lukács, for example – held that art (and especially literature as the privileged form of art) is a reflection of reality, supposed to capture its typicality, then the emerging theory of the production of knowledge and the critique of meta-narratives (from the sixties on) diminished the influence of the theory of reflection. This was built on the wrong epistemological assumption that to art too, a correspondence theory of truth as a kind of reflection applies without any residues. This might work if the Marxist philosophy of history really did amount to a ‘science’ or if a similar rigid framework could be established. This has not been the case, for the very idea of a science of history which could forecast and thus essentially influence the future was based on the erroneous presupposition that something like objective truths existed and that knowledge of society could function as mathematical or experimental sciences. Thus, paradoxically, those philosophers who stressed the productive and creative nature of the cognitive processes at the same time committed the fallacy of sticking to the opinion that in history too, rules applicable to mathematics could hold true. The important point for the cognitive function of art in this context was that it was viewed only as a cognitive means, as a way of seeing the world, society and the individual in it. As general rules were searched for, typical characters in typical situations served as the declared ideal. This description applies to orthodox Marxism. Contrarily, the so-called ‘western Marxism’ (and among its representatives especially the Frankfurt School) stuck to the opinion that only avant-garde art could show the truth of a society ensnared in fascism and later in consumerism. As in the romantic epoch art again played a special role and was deemed to be one of the rare truth-tellers in capitalist society and thence one of the bastions against repression. Now, looking from today’s vantage point, this description applies well to totalitarian

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 33.

societies,¹ rather less to authoritarian, and even less still to parliamentary democracies. In these, economic wealth and civil liberties cause an aesthetisation of everyday life and eliminate the basic conditions for the creativity and existence of avant-garde art as a relevant art form.

The dominant trends within the western Marxist tradition were detailed studies of art and culture as vehicles of truth or untruth on one hand, and sometimes, (and especially with the emergent structuralism and the later so-called 'critical theory' of the poststructuralist kind) dissolution of literary discourse and artistic creation into other forms of symbolic and discursive production. In this context, artworks retained only a small part of their previous individual and privileged artistic status. It is no coincidence that Marxist analyses which attempted to establish rather direct links between society and artworks functioned best when confronted with mediocre works. (As, for example, in the case of Pierre Macherey's analysis of novels of Jules Verne.²) At best they achieved a sociologistic analysis of art. They told us something about society in which such works were created but very little about them. Actually, this is the cognitive aspect or function of consumer culture of which the Frankfurt School wrote: such works tell a lot about their author and his public as well as about the society in which they both live but are devoid of the existential features of art. Such works tell us about the society and environment in which they were made (which of course was not their intended function) and actually do function as a product of the culture industry.

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What changes then, with the advent of postmodernism? Art is often becoming less avant-garde, more figurative and less isolated from society at large. Why is there a plethora of works being designated as art, whilst

¹ I have analysed the way in which culture and art function in a totalitarian society in my *Ideologija in umetnost modernizma* (Ideology and Art of Modernism), (Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1988).

² Pierre Macherey, *Pour une production littéraire* (Paris: Maspero, 1968).

there is nobody claiming a universal artistic value for them? What do these works tell us, if anything? Mostly, they speak about themselves, and offer an aesthetic effect which has often more to do with the material that was used for their creation (and which could be called its objecthood) than with existential truths embodied in them. If Kandinsky could claim in 1913 that his aim was carrying over to the public or the viewer his emotion via the picture,¹ then with contemporary installations this is hardly the case. We could paraphrase Michel Foucault's observation that history has 'transformed *monuments* of the past into *documents*',² but today, the situation is often reversed. What appeared to be documents (of the artist and his emotions) are often transformed into monuments and treated as meaningfully opaque entities. The majority of works proclaimed as art tell us very little, procure very little knowledge about their creators, the way they see the world, their emotions, feelings or thoughts or those that they create. In front of such works we do not experience that 'gaze' which through its very distance offers us identification or empathy. At the most, we find a unique use of materials. We experience an aesthetic feeling or become aware of their thinghood and its seen presence, i.e. of their separateness from other things and of their individuality, be this material or contextual. In such a situation it is understandable that institutional or neo-institutional theories abound and that generally, normative aesthetics is absent. Institutional theories attempt to include such works into the accepted notion of the term art but, on the other hand, to avoid the normative imperatives of an aesthetics and to accept the given (or designated) sense of what art is. For if we want to claim that something is not art we would have to advance strong arguments. Since, however, we can (with considerable certainty) conclude on the basis of previous experiences that almost anything or even anything can be proclaimed as art, the only road open is to find out how such 'anythings' can be included in the class of phenomena already accepted as art. This also shows that aesthetics has lost any hold it may have once possessed upon art, artists and the public or upon the artworld or artworlds.

¹ Wassily Kandinsky in *Der Sturm*, quoted by Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), p. 171.

² Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 14.

In the critical tradition and especially in the tradition of anthropological Marxism of the sixties such a relativistic approach was certainly not envisioned as the consequence of its endeavour to defetishize the institution of art and creativity. It was, however, perhaps necessary in so far as the orthodox Marxist tradition is, if anything, rigidly normative. Discarding normative aesthetics and replacing it with a descriptive one, i.e. accepting as art all that was socially accepted as such (on the basis of being designated 'art' by some fraction of the art-world) allowed such theories to distinguish themselves from the orthodoxy and also to accept very varied emerging (neo)avant-garde phenomena. One of the side effects of this situation was that many works became acceptable as artworks on the basis of their non-artistic features. Such works appeared primarily as criticism of a certain reality, and thus, through such a critique, as a certain 'truth' of the social reality in question. Only a minority of such works also contained the existential features deemed to be the necessary precondition for a work to be art.

On the other hand artworks are turning into pure objects intended only to be aesthetically contemplated, becoming thus equal to objects of nature. The history of the separation of the artistic beauty from the natural one seems to be in the process of reversal: artworks are more and more becoming like objects seen in nature or, if not that, they contain the same ontic hollowness existing in nature and its creations after the death of God. Natural objects too, are only *invested* with meaning; in them, as such, there is none.

What cognitive value have such works? Presumably none or very little. What knowledge do they offer? Probably none, except about the materials and procedures used for their execution. Can they be thus counted amongst artworks? This depends, of course, upon our criteria.

Much art offers existential experience. (This may even be described as a typical function of art, although I would disagree with Heidegger that the experience offered by art is not only unique but also practically the only one which enables us to regain our authenticity.) For art to be understood as a form of knowledge we have to accept

Gadamer's view that 'knowledge here means recognition'.¹ The precondition for art to be a form of knowledge is its status as mimesis. And this is exactly what Gadamer has in mind. For the above statement actually refers to Aristotelian mimesis: 'Mimesis is a representation in which we "know" and have in view the essential content of what is represented.'² Or, if it is not direct mimesis, it should offer us a key for its reading, i.e. for enabling us to treat it as a form of language. In cases of abstract art, as in the case of Kandinsky or Malevich matters are still relatively simple in so far as, to a certain degree, we are acquainted with the intention of the artists. On the other hand, with late modernist works and especially with postmodernist ones this trait, this contact with the author, vanishes or diminishes to such an extent that we cannot speak of shared experience or any form of identification. This is true especially where we are confronted with research in material that an artist uses for his artefact. (This line of reasoning would perhaps even bring us back to Roland Barthes' thesis of modernism itself as mainly a mode of research of its own language – a thesis which would cause additional problems for knowledge construed as being the main feature of art.) If we take knowledge to be the essential and necessary feature of what art is, then such works do not fall under the category 'art'. They may be aesthetic, but not artistic in the same way as the former, although they were created to serve as artworks. Perhaps then, they are simulacra of artworks. Or perhaps knowledge can be taken as a significant and essential trait only in some forms of art. For we probably do experience works of both a representational nature, and of nonrepresentational one (including those that explore the many aspects of objecthood in itself i.e. installations or compositions playing upon possibilities offered by different materials, shapes, colours, textures and dimensions) in a rather similar way. Thus applying the label 'art' to works which do not contain or were probably not invested with a symbolic meaning, we presume that they do include such a meaning, although all that we can be sure of, or perhaps, more concisely, all that we care about, is that they were made by a human hand. Similar shapes in na-

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful And Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1986), p. 119.

² *Ibid.*

ture often attain a similar spiritual and aesthetic effect. This would mean that only in some art forms and only in certain artworks (although they certainly form the majority of existing artworks) knowledge represents an essential feature. For some form of mimesis occurs in them, whether this mimetic element is based on figurative semblance or on a hidden one, based on abstraction. Others have predominantly an aesthetic function and are devoid of an invested symbolic meaning. The fact that a recipient might invest them with such a meaning, shows only that art is always a form of exchange – of symbolic exchange, exchange of meaning – between an object (and not necessarily another human being) and a specific person. Can the term knowledge be used for such a form of communication? It can, as long as undistorted communication is not its precondition and as long as knowledge is not understood as discursive knowledge. Knowledge as *recognition* can even be based on misunderstanding, on misunderstanding the artistic discourse or imagery, but understanding it, nevertheless, in the broader human framework. This applies to relationships between artworks and people and people among themselves: ‘[T]he really interesting relations between people don’t occur in the form of communication. Something else happens: a form of challenge, seduction, or play, which brings more intense things into being. By definition, communication simply brings about a relationship between things already in existence. It doesn’t make things appear. And what is more, it tries to establish an equilibrium – the message and all that. Yet it seems to me that there is a more exciting way of making things appear: not exactly communication, but something more of the order of challenge. I’m not sure this would involve an aesthetic of communication strictly speaking.’¹

If art is not founded on a communication, on an understanding, if there is no necessity for ‘somebody’ to be at the other end of an artwork, can we then still claim that we encounter an existential experience when we deal with ‘Art’? Gadamer can speak of art as knowledge offering a ‘recognition’ because he bases it in mimesis. But what about when we do not encounter mimesis? Suppose we put ourselves in front of a work or an activity which appears in a *context* on the basis of which

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Revenge of the Crystal* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), p. 24.

we can presume that we are dealing with a work of art. In such a case, it depends upon our response, our experience and insight whether we encounter a form of communication, even if this communication is devoid of that representational content which is typical of mimetic art. When it comes to installations, land art, happenings, etc. – as well as to bottle-racks and bicycle-wheels – it is the *context* which enables us to distinguish between, let us say, stone and a sculpture. But this does not suffice. It is not enough to have a context, we must also have the existential experience when confronting a work. We are talking here of gradations and not about absolutes. As I said before, as long as nature could be invested with a meaning (as was still the case in romanticism) then for that time aesthetic value was shared by nature and art: they were two sides of the same coin. Today we have *to know* that an object or activity has been invested with a meaning, otherwise we view it as an aesthetic (or unaesthetic) artefact which can function as an artwork but is not subjected to value judgements within the realm of existential experience. Rather it is the focus of such judgements within the realm of materiality and objecthood. If it offers this latter experience it offers at the most an *aesthetic* experience (as does a sunrise, or a human body, or an object of nature). It does not, however, enable us to make the identification which I consider to be necessary – not for a ‘real’ work of art, for all these artefacts are ‘real’ artworks – but rather for a *certain* crucial and central type of an artwork, the type which brought about other, nowadays probably predominant types of art. It goes without saying that all that has been said is crucially dependant upon historical, social, cultural and individual values, distinctions, perceptions and even namings. Still, all these variables do not force us, I think, to accept the relative nature of the institutional theory. What the institutional theory does is to diminish the role of the existential experience, conflating Art that offers it, and art which does not, into a nondescript whole.

The Diagnostic Value of Art

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Today avant-garde art has retained its aesthetic function only and has lost its truth-value. It has emptied itself of the meaning which it contained in the past. Perhaps all this signifies that in highly developed societies art as Art is dead, serving in most cases only the function of an ornament. This applies mainly to its creation; its reception may still be similar to the one it offered before. In those cases which the institutional theory primarily addresses this is probably often the case. Contrarily, in situations where art is bound up with existentially significant situations, it has retained the role of knowledge as recognition. In such situations art can also offer a kind of insight usually associated with other fields of knowledge. In some cases, indeed, art provides such insights much more efficiently. I am referring to the diagnostic function and value of art. In certain cases art has a distinctive way of forecasting social events. (Science, especially the so-called 'science of history' supposedly served such a role in the past.) Lukács' evaluations of contemporary literature were based on his belief that it is only a question of time before the capitalist world collapses. Thus his normative framework was essentially dependent upon a broader philosophy of history which embodied the Marxist view that history follows a certain progression which, although it is not guaranteed (Rosa Luxemburg used to say that the future will be either communism or barbarity), tends towards the realization of communism. In this sense Marxism is a philosophy of history and essentially tries to determine the necessary steps to achieve a certain aim: the classless society. For this reason the five-year plans were necessary and the whole edifice of planned economy (and of strictly organised society as a whole) was crucial. It was believed that history finally attained the level of 'hard' science and that the future could be, if not forecasted, then certainly influenced in an essential way. The global social plan followed lines sketched in advance and the role of art in this environment was to serve as a vehicle for attaining this aim. Lukács' own change of views in his later works and his

‘rephilosophication’ could be viewed as a pessimistic acceptance that scientific socialism has failed. We find a similar view amongst other writers in the sixties. At the same time, however, Louis Althusser was still able to speak of history as that continent of science which was discovered by Marx and which is, besides mathematics and physics, the only real science. In spite of such beliefs it turned out that history is unpredictable. Moreover, history as a science was not able to predict the collapse of socialism in Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall, etc. But was the situation different in the case of art?

What I am now asking, in other words, is not whether art has a cognitive value (a problem which I have addressed in the opening part of this essay) but rather, the question of in what way it can provide knowledge about the present – a mode of knowledge distinct from that of more ‘reliable’ scientific sources.

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In traditional aesthetics and art or literary criticism the cognitive feature of art was highly valued. The theories of the post-war period brought to the fore the idea of an artwork – or ‘work’ – as an entity in itself, not to be viewed or valued on the basis of its cognitive value but as a ‘monument’. Also, the general trends in art ran counter to such demands. The new, neoavant-garde or avant-garde art had to be either discarded and ignored or had to be taken as the basis of value judgments which solely concerned this art itself. Art finally attained a position in which it served not as a vehicle for some extrinsic aim or depicted subject-matter, but as a reality *per se*, worthy of claiming its own existence and identity according to its own standards. If the existential approach claims that art has to show some *inner* (subjective) truth, then the orthodox position – of orthodox Marxism or any other utilitarian and eschatological theory – would claim that art has to show the truth of the *outer* (objective) reality: the reality of a certain society, environment or epoch, viewed through different eschatological eyes.

The defenders of the early avant-gardes (Adorno, Bloch, Benjamin and a host of others after the second world war) argued that these avant-gardes presented not the immediate truth (as Lukács would claim) but the hidden and essential reality of contemporaneity. Such a tendency, in their eyes, served a special function, for it retained its autonomy and did not succumb to consumerism and the industrial nature of mass culture and the market. Instead, avant-garde artists retained the upright stature of those who, by consciously rejecting market values, with artistic means thereby painted the 'truth' of a capitalist society in which opposition had all but disappeared. From this position, morally acceptable and artistically productive, (but otherwise fallacious) – emerged those artforms which worked on matter not on the basis of providing knowledge of what *an existence is*, but so as to present the viewer with insight as to what *a material* or what *the material is*. Such legitimate endeavours bring together two disparate meanings of art: the first moving from the artist through his work to the audience, and the second offering the audience material which is an aesthetic object or activity in its own right – having almost the same status as natural objects. With the death of God natural objects have lost their spiritual content. Now we know that they are just objects of the physical, animal or vegetative world. We know that *we* invest them with meaning and that the only unity among them and us is to belong to the same planet and perhaps to share a similar destiny when it comes to suffering or death. The very use of these terms, we know, already signifies an anthropocentrism.

With artworks existing as material objects in which their basic trait is to represent a search in the materials themselves something similar happens. Here too, we view them in their objecthood or thinghood, we become aware of their existence and of the existence of their texture, composition, colour, shape and nuances, of their cracks or other individual features. The only features distinguishing them from similar works of nature is the context in which they appear and the fact that they are man-made. In one respect they are similar to art that offers existential experience: they offer the experience of uniqueness, of also 'de-automization' of an ordinary object or activity.

These or similar works can also offer an existential experience in a more direct way. Works, for example, by Anish Kapoor are instruc-

tive here. By using simple materials, with the now common necessary interpretation or self-explanation, he attains an artistic as well as an aesthetic effect. But in such cases the expected effect is much more difficult to determine than in the case of figurative and traditional works. Again, the theoretical and explanatory context is the important one that enables us to 'read' the work.

With certain contemporary societies or their segments ('artworlds' included) becoming more and more stable and unproblematic, art becomes more and more ornamental and unproblematic itself: its existential role has diminished. In such contexts, life itself has become aesthetic. Art correspondingly becomes more of a social reality rather than a symbolic representation i.e. a fictitious and aesthetic mirage. Life itself, indeed, has become a kind of stale art, aesthetic rather than genuinely artistic. It cannot be genuinely artistic, for this would mean that the existential elements formerly represented and even forced upon us by art had become interiorized; that our life became so much 'fuller' and 'richer' (just the opposite, in fact, of what the Spanish surrealist playwright Fernando Arrabal once said: 'Why do I write plays? Because I cannot live them in my own life').

Looking for the diagnostic value in art is strongly linked to past attempts to see in artworks a 'mirror' of society. All these objectives can still be valid, although today they fall under the research carried out by sociology of art and literature. As mentioned before, there is no doubt that art does have a cognitive function. Artworks tell us about their creators, their public, the art establishment and the society or environment in which they are created and consumed, about the symbolic space they inhabit. But does this knowledge exceed their immediate present? Could it be that at least some artworks (obviously not many of them) *announce* the future? That they escape the destiny of the 'science of history' which follows the destiny of Minerva's owl? Art is not systematic or as detached as the results of historical research. It is much more susceptible to the environment in which it is created. If this environment is detached from everyday events, so too is art of an aristocratic, classicist or academic sort. Art 'from the other side' (i.e. created amidst social upheavals, even if they are not yet discursively detected) is different. It often detects and presents in a symptomatic way significant

events and processes, even before they are diagnosed by scientists, politicians and others. Now, we may claim that looking at some artwork from a temporal, cultural or social distance enables us to discern certain traits of an environment which somebody living, creating or appreciating such a work amidst that environment would not be aware of. It is true that such a distance, which also signifies a 'difference', enables us to see things which would otherwise escape our eyes. But this is not what I have in mind here. What I am referring to are works which tell us an essential truth about present and perhaps future (and not only past) events in a certain society. To discern this, the distance mentioned above is usually necessary. For a person living in an environment of this sort would be too caught up in, and overwhelmed by, that environment, to fully recognize the significance of events surrounding him.

In encountering the art which I have in mind here, we are usually dealing with a body of works which represent a minor cultural phenomenon. Rap music in the Los Angeles area in 1992, art in Slovenia in the eighties,¹ punk music in Britain, Poland and West Germany in the eighties, or art of the whites in South Africa even today, all present us with a *violence* which is one of the basic traits of such art. To be precise, this art does not forecast events, nor does it predict them. What it does is point out that something crucial is happening in a certain society, that a certain environment is going through a profound change and that this change is being registered by artistic means. Now, this may not seem much. For is it not always the case that art to some degree mirrors a certain society or environment? This is blatantly true. Nevertheless, the basic difference arises in our case not from this art being essentially different from other kinds, but from it diagnosing enormous social and personal crises which people submerged in schematic – often scientific – ways of thinking would simply never register as a crisis situation and which would thence never be diagnosed as such.

There are certain limits which constrain a human being and the same, of course, is true of any society or community. In individual

¹ See Aleš Erjavec & Marina Gržnič, *Ljubljana, Ljubljana (Slovenian Art of the Eighties)* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1991).

creativity there are physiological limits to our abilities; in the case of a collective body there are limits to what it can stand. In such cases (ranging from children's pictures of life in concentration camps to the L.A. rap music) art also has a therapeutic effect. But beside this it also materializes (in a discursive way) deep existential crises. These crises can be purely individual – as in the case of Franz Kafka (whose work is still profoundly opaque to interpretation). Or it can be collective – as in the case of *samizdats* in the former Soviet Union or in the case of violence expressed in the works of white South African artists who, although shielded from the direct impact of the apartheid system, nevertheless indirectly and emotionally respond to its existence. It is the incessant danger lurking behind apparently harmless everyday errands that seeps into the individual and re-emerges in pictures by William Kentridge, in sculptures by David Brown, or in the cut-off pieces of flesh hanging as artworks in the sculptures of Jane Alexander.¹

Obviously, the mentioned artists and their work are not forecasting what will happen in their countries; in the case of South Africa it has been obvious for some time that the apartheid system is inhuman. But, on the other hand, in some of the other previously mentioned cases (such as the significance of punk and rap music for certain European countries and Los Angeles respectively, or of postmodern art for the break-up of former socialist countries) the wider social, political and historical connotations of the events which art expressed and practically announced was not at all obvious (although a sensitive social scientist would have been able to use it as a diagnostic device to gauge the social and political temperature of the societies in question).

All the afore mentioned countries experienced a period of profound social and political conflict and the 'grass roots' art and culture reacted against them in specific ways. That art can tell us a lot about such states of affairs is witnessed by the story about an ancient Chinese emperor who ordered his staff in different provinces to collect folk tales so he could discern from them the political situation there.

¹ See Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Claremont, South Africa: David Philip, 1989), especially pp. 30–33, 56–57, and 42–45.

Art can obviously be an excellent source of information about a society, communities, social classes or simply 'types' or characters which then serve as archetypes for people in our everyday lives. But can it *predict* events? The answer has to be negative. In this respect art is somewhat better off than 'science', whether this be the science of history, the political sciences etc. Not only does contemporary art (at least in the recent past) follow emergent events more closely and more synchronously than sciences or philosophy (which has mostly discarded such a role). It reacts to events *simultaneously*, even when they are not even visible on a broader scale. One of the reasons for this may be that art is more susceptible to such phenomena than science, because it is not hindered by rigid conceptual frameworks. Such frameworks often prevent the recognition of new phenomena simply because, with conceptual tools, formed in a different situation and context, we cannot *see* what is distinctive about current events. We try to *reduce* them to the existing ill-fitting conceptual frameworks. It takes something extraordinary to open our eyes. In certain cases, such as rap music in California in 1992, the music showed the emergent social tensions much before they erupted. Indeed, if we bear in mind Michel Foucault's claim that Marxism was like fish in the water in the 19th century, then the very fact that some of the texts written and performed by Ice-T, of Public Enemy and so on, witness a markedly 'Marxist' analysis of concrete social situations. In an implicit way we thus perceive the social context in which such groups arise as analogous to socially highly stratified environments, with a marked level of class conflict. In the era of Marx and industrialization social classes of course existed, but they have been now transformed: in the postmodern age society is more complex and thus socially more diverse. The same claims could be made about works by artists who were social critics in the previous century (ranging from Dickens and Zola to Jean-François Millet and Daumier). The public's eyes were opened by what these artists showed about society. In our contemporary globalized situation the same applies to cases from very different countries, but with a similar result: art shows us – in California, the former socialist countries, and South Africa, for example – the hidden reality, a reality covered by pre-existing views and one which is only made visible by the work of certain artists. This critical stance in

art, starting with romanticism when the artist felt for the first time compelled *as an artist* to be a critic of the society or of the existing order and to fight for freedom and liberty, has become an inherent feature of art. The ideas of freedom and liberty, perceived as *ideas* (and not as ideologies) have enabled art to be viewed as one of the paramount forms of human freedom, in terms of both its creation and reception. Is there in postmodernity still an art that would fight for such aims? There is no reason to believe otherwise. But we should not look for a similar mode of partisanship as was common in modernist times. Rather, a critique of the microlevel of ideology is present, with a re-evaluation of modernist truths and myths. It is in this way that there exists a continuation of the existential role (and mode) of art.