# Art and Culture Today*

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The standard use of the word 'culture' is to refer globally to whatever is opposed to nature, whatever is a matter of learned behaviour as opposed to whatever is built into our psychology and physiology. But the next thing to say is that nature is culture and culture is nature: that is, what is most deeply a part of human nature is that human beings live culturally, in learned ways of life mediated by locally developed languages and symbol systems, so that our culture is natural to us while our nature is accessible to us only in ways mediated by our culture. Despite that, however, the polarity of nature and culture is a fact of our experience and a fact of ideology. Structuralists especially, and their successors in the tradition of Saussurean linguistic analysis, succumb to the nightmare that reality in today's information-saturated age is not mediated by culture but has quite disappeared, so that our world is entirely one of simulation and illusion.[1] But to think like that is to be inattentive to the actual weight and quality of one's life as one lives it minute by minute, and to the roughness and sheen of the earth. We eat actual food, sleep on solid beds, open tangible doors on streets where winds really blow in our own faces.

In addition to the global contrast between the natural and cultural aspects or tendencies in human life, the word 'culture' is used with the indefinite article, 'a culture,' to refer to the specific way of life shared by some more or less clearly differentiated group, and distinguishable as a totality from other ways of life pertaining to other such groups. Every human being belongs to some culture or cultures and fails to belong to others, and this is so whether one reflects on the matter or not.[2]

There is a third thing we sometimes mean by the word culture: the culture of a group may be identified with that part of its way of life of which it is conscious as distinctive, as what 'we' do.

Then there is a fourth thing: that part of 'culture' in the third sense that is consciously cultivated and used to maintain a group's sense of its identity. It is this sense of the word that is evoked by the word 'multiculturalism', a phenomenon whereby parts of a political unit are encouraged to foster certain distinctive traits that may serve to maintain a sense of difference from the surrounding hordes. This is actually contrasted with the third sense of the term, because by equating cultural identity with a handful of traits and traditions one

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as it were neutralizes the divisive tendency to think of oneself as *altogether* a special sort of person whose *whole* life is self-consciously distinctive.

The fifth sense of 'culture' is the kind that makes one a 'cultured' or 'cultivated' person, and is tied in to an educational system: within the way of life of a group as a whole, certain skills and habits are specially fostered and esteemed and are inculcated by official institutions of training. This kind of culture is supposed to require effort to attain and is supposed to repay that effort: its attainment represents a publicly acknowledged ideal. It is what the Canada Council and similar bodies stand for; I don't think you can have it without an educational system and I don't think you can have an educational system without it.

In imperial or metropolitan civilizations, in which the official educational system is superimposed on local ways of life with which it may have no discernible relation, the fifth sense of 'culture' passes over into what is really a sixth: high culture is now contrasted with what is provincial or ethnic, not simply as education versus lack of education, but as civilization versus lack of civilization.[3] Ethnic dances may be as hard to learn, may be objects of as refined a discrimination, as ballet; but they don't count, because the people who go in for them are, by definition, not the best people.[4]

Seventhly and lastly, of course, there is the derelativized equivalent of the sixth, Culture with a capital C, the absolute perfection of mankind. The idea behind this is that all educational systems in the end converge at the top: that just as mathematics is everywhere mathematics, and physics is ideally just physics, so when all local distortions are purged away Art will be simply Art, polite society will be everywhere the same, sharing everywhere the same tastes because the human physiology and psychology are themselves everywhere the same, so that in the end a single world civilization will sustain a single educational system and a single world-wide art. This conviction is implicit in the very idea of 'enlightenment'. It is thought naive to believe in it nowadays, as well as pernicious, because it is felt to be a mere cover for the imperialism identified in the preceding paragraph. But much of what goes on in the world makes sense only if something like it is true.

Those are the seven meanings of the word culture, corresponding to seven aspects of the ways human values are organized. The rest of what I am going to say will have to do with all seven of them, but not directly. To think about culture is to think either about anthropology or about the ideology of education, and that is not quite the emphasis I want to bring out.

Here, then, is where the story really begins. The first thing I have to say is that it is crazy, really deeply crazy, for someone to travel thousands of miles to talk about art and culture or values today. Except for a couple of hours around midnight, when most of us are asleep in our beds anyway, today is the same day

in Alberta and in Ontario, so no need to talk about that. What about culture and values? Our culture is what we live, our values are what we live by. Either they are the same for me as for you, or they are different. If they are different, why do you want to know about mine when you have your own? If they are the same, you do not need to be told about them—you know as much about them as I do. Our values are what we live by; they are our lives; they are not something we need information about. We grow into them, we learn them from those from whom we learn how to live. If we who have reached years of discretion need to be reminded of them, it is by way of exhortation, not of instruction or explanation; and if you are not already committed to the true, the beautiful, the good, the holy, the far out, or whatever, you are not likely to undertake such commitment at my urging. The only excuse would be if I were talking about cultures five through seven, the culture with its associated values as tied in to the educational machinery. Since I have come from one university to another, perhaps that's it: we are to compare professional notes. But is my educational system the same as yours? Apparently not, since education in this country [Canada] is a provincial responsibility. But perhaps that means that we all officially believe in culture seven, the ideal on which all systems converge. Each province manages its own education only in the same spirit that each family might grow its own potatoes in its own back yard—the potatoes are exactly the same, we just get the satisfaction of digging our own. If so, my presence is like that of a neighbour leaning over your back fence and asking how your potatoes are coming. But can anyone nowadays really believe in culture seven? Well, we'd better believe it, since our whole university system is built on it.

That disposes of today, and values, and culture too for that matter. What's left of my topic is art. Does it make any better sense for me to talk about art? Old values in old art are an old story, so there are three possibilities. I could tell you about new values in old art, or I could tell you about old values in new art, or I could tell you about new values in new art. But can you learn about any of that from a stranger? Surely not. I don't know what art is, but I am convinced that it is something the value of which is released only in direct experience. A picture, for instance, can have no artistic value that is not released in the seeing of it, or that does not depend on a value so released. If a picture moves you to love God or to overthrow the government, its doing so is related to its being a work of art only if it is the effect of some value you find in looking at the picture itself. Otherwise, the picture is a mere causal stimulus or a piece of evidence. So only two kinds of people can usefully tell you about what is new in art and culture: people who know you well enough to share your values and visions, and enthusiasts who can sell you on what is new in this or that art. Why should a professor of philosophy be a person of either of those kinds? Should I tell you

that what you need is not me but a friend or a salesman? Well, if so, I have told you.

Whatever I say, I can hardly be talking about *your* art and *your* values; and I am here to tell you that there really is something crazy, if you stop to think about it, in being concerned with art and values that are other than your own. So what good reason can you good people have for being here? Curiosity, perhaps—something really irrelevant always makes a nice change. And then, when a speaker picks on a broad-sounding topic, there is the interest of discovering what will be put in and what will be left out, what will come first and what will be left till last, and what will come in between. So now you know what I will have said first.

Here is what I have to say next. Some years ago, two good old-fashioned professors, Bertram Jessup and Melvin Rader, published a book called *Art and Human Values*.[5] There theme was that art, taken as a whole, expresses all human values. If love is something that matters to people, there will be art that anatomizes and celebrates love; if there are people for whom pure politics is an original passion, the passion of politics will find expression in art; and so on. So an anatomy of values will be one sort of anatomy of art—and vice versa too, I suppose, if one could be as sure about what counts as art as one may be as what counts as a value. And I suppose that one sort of value would be the value of art itself, and that art expressing or celebrating that value would be at best a pure expression of celebration or celebration of expression.

The trouble with putting things that way, I mean talking about anatomies of art or of values, is that it makes it sound as if one could divide one's values up into neat packages, religion, love, self-esteem, health, wealth and so on. But that is a very external way of treating something that in relation to our lives is not external at all. When we speak of values what we mean is *all* the things we want in life, all our reasons and motives for doing what we do. And whatever we do is done from a motive or for a reason, usually something specific to the occasion and always something very complicated, because whatever we do shows what we most want to do and thus involves directly or indirectly the whole shape of our lives at that moment.[6] Everything we do has a value, and its value has three dimensions: the worth that action has in itself, what it contributes to further ends, and how it relates to other possible actions and their values.[7] Our values, that is, are not less complex than our lives, and not less subtly ordered, so that what we can convey about them by anatomizing them into gross categories like 'religion' or 'sex' is very little—is perhaps less than nothing, because what it contributes to the description of our lives may be less than it does in falsifying what it is like to be a living person.

Well then, if Jessup and Rader were right when they said that art expresses all human values, and human values are not less than the whole of life, then the

scope of art is not less than everything. If my intention in coming here was to furnish an anatomy, a way of describing art and values so that you could get a hold on them in your minds, talking about 'art and alienation' or 'art and revolution,' it would be like trying to shut you up in a set of boxes. In fact, the word 'culture' in its second sense, whereby we talk about a culture as the totality of the way of living learned within a society, is often supposed to carry within itself the implication that a culture is essentially indivisible, so that a culture cannot be properly described but only lived, not for the trivial reason that no description of anything can say everything about what it describes, but because the very project of description violates the kind of reality that a culture has.

But what is this 'art', of which our venerable authors could say that it celebrated or expressed everything that could be expressed or celebrated? In a way, we know. It is the sort of thing we find in art galleries, and we soon learn what that is. And we soon notice that people who talk about the nature and function of art include anything in the way of music, or literature, or architecture, or film, that gets treated in the same sort of way, or is assigned the same sort of human significance, as what we find in art galleries. But what counts as relevant likeness here? What about clothes, for instance? Is a Chinese emperor's silken robe a work of art?[8] If so, what about a motor-cyclist's silver-studded black jacket, which certainly expresses values in a very direct and eloquent way? But then, which jacket of which cyclist? Who decides what belongs in what sort of museum? If a wino squats in a doorway and drinks from a bottle swathed to its neck in a brown paper bag, the bag and the act of wrapping express the wino's values; and in just what sort of gallery would they be at home? That sounds like a frivolous question, but really it isn't at all: a responsible answer calls on the resources of sociology, political philosophy, art history and the psychology of perception, to name a few disciplines almost at random, and so far no one has found an answer to it that is convincingly better than every other answer. And suppose you did decide that a wino's paper bag was a work of art and belonged in some gallery or other, you would still have to figure out which wino, and which of his bags, to choose. And then you might prefer to leave all the bikers on their bikes and the winos in their doorways and declare the whole world to be a museum and everything in it to be art. 'We are blessed by everything', said Yeats, 'everything we look upon is blest'.[9] The medieval scholastics argued that everything that existed had some beauty, and Schopenhauer agreed with them, and surely when St Thomas Aquinas agrees with Schopenhauer it is not for the likes of us to gainsay them.[10]

However, if everything people do expresses their values, and art expresses all human values, it does not follow that whatever expresses values is art. The net of art may be narrowly or widely drawn, with meshes of different sizes. It

is not merely that different people have different ideas about what counts as art and what does not; what is more important is that each of us, on different occasions and for different purposes, wants to exclude and include different things in the same category as what is for us most indubitably art. Things get confusing because smart people keep confronting us with objects that they say we must accept as art because in some obviously relevant respect they are just like the things we already accept, though we may feel that art would not be worth bothering with if we either had to reject the latter or accept the former.[11] Don't let those smart people bother you. Really all we need say in reply is that we are not fishing with that net today, thank you.

I do not know how many useful ways there are of specifying what art is, any one of which may be just what we need on some occasion. Here are seven to be going on with—seven nets, each probably catching fewer fish than the one before it.

First, we can say that *whatever* expresses values is art, but since whatever enters our lives has some meaning and hence some value, that means we will be saying that *everything* is art, or that anything anyone *calls* art is art, or that any product of human activity that anyone *thinks of as* art is art. Everything is potentially meaningful, and wherever meaningfulness is found and proclaimed, there actually is art. People do say such things. I've heard them.

Second, we can equate art with the aesthetic. Much of our lives is a matter of bleak necessity; whatever goes beyond that, whatever in our lives is elaborated and attended to for its own sake, is to that extent playful and free, and therefore belongs to the realm of art. When we eat, it is very seldom that we merely grab a handful of berries from a bush: we have meals, sitting at table, at which food is cooked and prepared and served in an established order, in cups and on plates which are very often all of the same design. Not every meal is a formal banquet; but even the most casual snack partakes to some extent in the ritual of the table that forms part of the fabric of civilized life. In this sort of way, some people maintain, practically the whole of life is patterned and converted into art. (Art in this sense comes close to 'culture' in the third sense of the term, but isn't quite that; it equates art with the aesthetic, not with what contributes to ethnic solidarity.)

Third, we can say that that pervasive transformation of our necessities into culture and ritual, real and important though it may be, is not necessarily art. It isn't art unless it's something we wouldn't do at all if it were not for its expressive value or for simple delight in its beauty. Art is gratuitous ornament and adornment. Art in that sense is not necessarily a good thing; it includes a lot of gratuitous messing things up, a lot that in other moods we might contrast with art as *kitsch*, expressing nothing beyond the will to make a fuss or an empty homage to the idea of art itself.

A fourth view equates art not with embellishment at large, but with the fine arts—painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, music, dance, theatre, and perhaps a few more. These are forms of organized enhancement of life that go beyond decoration and involve the systematic cultivation of means of expression in a publicly recognized institutional context. Art is now the arts, which professionals practice for their public and we ourselves may pursue for ourselves and each other in an amateur way. These are things that we learn about at school, as part of our liberal education, and some of which our schools may actually teach us to do. This brings us into the domain of culture in the fifth sense. But art as thus understood includes every proper employment of the skills and media in question, and thus embraces much that is trivial, mere amusement and entertainment, and no doubt much that to a serious person must seem debased and corrupt.

A fifth view of art reflects that art is a serious business. If art expresses values, nothing can possibly be more serious than values (for seriousness is a measure of the value of values). In this frame of mind we will want to say that only part of the embellishment of life, or of the practices of the fine arts, that goes beyond decoration and entertainment and is really in earnest is worthy of the name of art. What we put into our art museums and onto our postage stamps, what we find worth mentioning in a history of art, is what repays attention, what is worth working at, what we are the better for; and nothing less than that should be called art. Here we are rather in the domain of culture in the sixth sense, but the fit is not at all exact.

A sixth view of art goes further still. What is serious and precious may include much that is academic and routine, worthy in its way but making little real difference to anything. But there is a kind of seriousness that goes beyond what our institutions have recognized. There is a pure spirit of art, we now say, that goes beyond and against the academies and galleries. Only that which expresses what was never expressed before and brings new values to the point of recognition is truly expressive of values and not merely an anecdotal repetition of that which was expressed long ago. Art is what makes history, contributes to the development of humanity, a high art that prophesies against all establishments in the name of what was never before perceived or felt. The only true art is what stands at the thrusting point, the cutting edge, of what in our weaker and slacker movements we allow to usurp the name.[12] And here we are on the territory of culture in the seventh sense, because if and only if there can be such a culture do we have the right to postulate such a status for any art.

Finally a seventh view of art carries on the impetus of the sixth. If established values are not real values but only the corpses of past values, the value of art itself is dead value. The true art is then the renunciation of art; the true artist will renounce art for an ironic anti-art, or will simply give up and play

chess or smuggle rifles. By the same token, the seventh sense of culture is the very antithesis of culture in the second sense, of the actual ways of life in which all values are rooted. And this seventh way of drawing the boundaries of art has to be the end of the line, for if the only true art is the rejection of art, I suppose it follows that the only true art is the rejection of the rejection of art, so that if we want to make sense when we think and talk about art we would do better to settle for something more modest, and may do so with a good conscience. And in fact, most of the time when most of us are talking and thinking about art we are doing so somewhere in the middle of the range of views I have laid before you, according to which not everything is art but quite a lot is.

Art, say Jessup and Rader, expresses and celebrates all human values. But just how *is* art related to values, or to culture? Obviously one cannot say if art and culture can mean so many different things. If people say they are going to talk about the relation between art and culture or value, we have to wait and hear what they say before we know what relationship between what and what else they have in mind. This is one of my main themes, so it will not be out of place for me to complicate things even more. Here are half a dozen things that someone who promised to talk about art and values might turn out to be talking about, and there must be lots more.

First, if we take art in something like the fourth sense, so that art coincides with the professional practice of the fine arts including the entertainment industries, it is obvious that art in general will respond to and reflect the values of society at large: what is done will show what there is a demand for and what there is a compulsion to do. A country's TV programming, for instance, reflects a system of choices that has its own significance, and the fact that it is this system of choices that has prevailed has another kind of significance.

Second, art conceived in the same sort of way may form a totality that articulates the mythology which constitutes the world in which its society imaginatively lives. We think now not of the actual system of choices and preferences, of hopes and fears, that is reflected in what is done and left undone, but the imaginative world-order, the structures of thought revealed in what is done, in the sorts of ways explored by such men as Northrop Frye and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Third, one can argue that art as the expression of values must celebrate and reinforce those values, and the values it predominantly expresses must be the dominant ones, which must of course be the values of the dominant class, so that art will be a reactionary or revolutionary political instrument unless an artist can contrive to prevent it being so. Such a view may be described as 'marxist', but it is hardly disputable if the phrase 'dominant class' has any application. The system of choices that prevails in a society prevails because there is power behind it—that, after all, is what power *is*; and the fact that as

expression and celebration art has the air of freedom must bestow an unwarranted impression of legitimacy on whatever it expresses and celebrates.

Fourth, if we confine art to what is serious, which was the fifth use of the term that we mentioned, we will say that art reflects not the values we happen to have or those that go with political power, but the values we esteem ourselves for having. We effect this restriction in two ways. On the one hand, we might first decide what art was serious, and then look to see what values it enshrined; on the other hand, we might start by deciding what values are to be preferred, and then confine the name of art to what suitably expressed those preferred values.

Fifth, if we insist that art is really serious and we call nothing art unless it demands close attention, we may say that art does not *celebrate* values at all, for celebration should not be hard work. Nor can it merely *reflect* values, for reflection requires no effort. Art will call for attention because it goes against the grain, is difficult and harsh. And then we may say, as T. W. Adorno did, that the value in art is that, in being austere and true to its self-imposed tasks of creation and discovery, it offers almost the only refuge for a free mind in today's managed and manipulated societies.[13]

Sixth and last, if we confine art to the thrusting point and cutting edge of the consciousness of historical humanity, we may say that art as such does not merely ignore prevailing values in favour of its own but is a destroyer of established values, that the true voice of art is the voice of rejection: that art when it is most itself expresses what Morse Peckham called 'man's rage for chaos'.[14]

All these six things we can say, and argue for, while still clinging to the thesis that art as such expresses all human values. It is just a question of *how* those values are to be expressed, and what *sort* of art will express them, and *when*.

But there is yet another complication I want to bring to your attention. When we say that art expresses and celebrates values it sounds straightforward enough. Painters express their admiration of a person's beauty by doing a picture in which that person's beauty is displayed and thus celebrated; novelists express their loathing for bourgeois hypocrisy by telling a story in which that hypocrisy is gleefully laid bare and thus celebrated. But a sociologist who was studying the audience for pop groups in a British city some years ago found that there were three different ways in which such a group and its fans might be related. Sometimes the relation was simple: people who preferred a particular style of music might simply be united by their actual liking for it, and perhaps observably sharing certain economic and social characteristics. But sometimes the music and its associated life-style shared the same general character. And in other cases again the relation was closer and

more functional: the use of the music actually entered into and supported the chosen way of life. These three observed relationships correspond roughly to the second, third, and fourth senses of the word 'culture' that I picked out above. The present point is that when people say that art expresses values it isn't usually clear that they had any one of these relationships in mind rather than some two or them or all three or, indeed, something else entirely.[15]

Why am I making all these distinctions and enumerating all these possibilities? Chiefly because a few years ago one was constantly reading in the newspapers that the distortions and harshnesses of modern art express the alienation of modern humanity or the sickness of the modern age, or something equally pervasive and depressing. Such pronouncements sound reasonable enough until you ask what they mean; after all, distortion and anxiety do seem to belong together somehow. But when we have before our minds a whole heap of alternatives, as you and I do now, we see at once that such statements do not mean anything in particular. It is most unlikely that the authors of such statements have asked themselves the appropriate questions, or, if they had, knew what answer they would give, much less what reasons they might have for asserting that the particular relationship they had in mind was the one that really obtained, rather than one of the many other possibilities. I suspect that even Rader and Jessup, when they said that art expresses all human values, meant nothing more definite than that art is not something that exists in a compartment all its own, cut off from the major concerns of life. I expect they would have said that all sorts of art are related to all sorts of concerns in all sorts of ways, and the more ways you can think of, the more of the truth you will have.

Almost everything I have said so far has been about art and culture and values at any time and place. What about today? Well, the main thing about today is that it is much like any other day. Despite all transformations of the means and relations of production, and despite the communications revolution, human beings continue to be born, grow up, grow old, sicken, and die, and meanwhile eat and drink and procreate, as they always have. The languages that frame their thoughts have had the same sort of structure throughout recorded history; the list of passions that move us has had few additions or deletions in all that time; there are few really new virtues or sins. If that is so, the largest and most important part of art will not have changed much either, even if it never gets into the papers. The papers never report the important things, like the fact that on any given day the majority of the billions of people who were breathing at dawn are still breathing at nightfall.

If everything done on the day I write this, or on the day you hear it, were to be deleted from the storehouse and memory of the world, it would make no perceptible difference. Not only is no one day's art essential, no one day's art

is even noticeable.

No use talking about today, then. Let us narrow down more slowly. The first restriction we could make on the universality of our discourse would be to western civilization as a whole: the civilization that acknowledges the ancestry of Greek thought and Israelite piety. Are there any values distinctive of that civilization a such? If there are, they are surely so pervasive that we are not aware of them. As Marshall McLuhan so memorably said, 'We don't know who discovered water, but we do know it wasn't a fish'. We would have to conjecture what they might be from our sense of how other civilizations seem to differ from it; and that sense itself would be an expression of our unconscious predispositions.

I did once hear an eminent anthropologist venture an answer to this apparently unanswerable question of what is distinctive in the values of our civilization as a whole.[16] He had been investigating, among other things, the 'cargo cults' of certain Pacific islands, a curiously dislocated religious phenomenon that was not rooted in the native cultures of those who practised it but represented a reaction to the impact of Western technology and missionary activity. The message that missionaries chiefly convey, he reflected, is not the gospel they preach but the whole way of life they exemplify. And he reached the conclusion that what missionaries, traders, and all such Western emissaries to remote parts of the world represent, that is distinctive and alien to the cultures they invade, the distinctive value of our civilization, is individuality. Not individualism, but individuality, a notion in three parts: uniqueness, the idea that every person is unlike any other and is to be esteemed and respected for himself or herself alone; morality, the idea that people are to be guided not by the folkways but by their own convictions of right and wrong; and responsibility, the idea that these unique and moral individuals are not independent of each other but must have a caring regard for the standards, the traditions, and the interests of the society in which they live and to which they belong. This sounds to me like a description of the individual as defined by Hegel, but the anthropologist did not look to me like someone who would have been reading Hegel lately, and he claimed the authority not of philosophy but of social science. This set of ideas, he said, is ubiquitous in western civilization and is found nowhere else. And what is most distinctive in it is the individual's readiness to enter into and return from *anomie*, the separation of oneself from all social limits, a separation and return which in other civilizations is limited to special social positions like that of the shaman, but in our civilization is essential to the individual being of each of us.

My special reason for singling out the anthropologist's claim is that one could well argue that the practice of serious art *as such* (that is, as carried on *under the concept* of art) is unique to our society and expresses and celebrates

just this value of individuality. If you were to set out on a serious career as an artist I think it would be just these three demands of uniqueness, of morality, and of responsibility, that impinged on you, from yourself, from your critics, and from your professional colleagues—that is, from all those who took what you were doing seriously for its own sake. If that is true, then one thing to say about art and values today is that it is in serious art that the predominant value set of our common culture is explicitly recognized as supreme, whereas everywhere else it is only tacitly manifested and is even more often compromised than it is in the arts.

Narrowing down from western civilization, our next approximation to 'today' is the day of the industrial revolution, the day of the jobholder, the day when labour is divided almost to the point of pulverization. In this age the characteristic condition is said to be that of alienation, the loss of any sense of control over the determinants of our existence. Our lives are shaped and packaged by big government, big business, or simply the interconnectedness of a complex economy, and the human rhythms of our lives are violated by bureaucratization and mechanization. Now, I do not know at all how many people's experience of themselves and their own lives is predominantly one of alienation and self-loss. I don't think mine is, but I may be exceptionally lucky, for two reasons. First, I was sent at an early age to a boarding school where I picked up very young the trick of living a private life in the interstices of institutions (like a mammal among the feet of dinosaurs), so that I grew up deceitful and embittered but not alienated; and, second, university professors have immensely more control over the rhythms of the working lives they live in their ivory termiteries than almost any other kind of wage slave. Still, many people are quite sure this is an age of alienation, so it cannot be out of place to ask what comes of art and values in such an age. I will just mention three views. They are not rivals, but complementary, dealing with different aspects of the situation as they see it.

First comes T. W. Adorno, whose views I already mentioned as the fifth of our six ways of relating art to values. In the present context his view comes to this, that if art is the activity in which the western value of individuality is especially celebrated it will preserve that value against the manipulations of social forces when all else fails. It is quite true, Adorno admits, that in the long run art, like everything else in the superstructure of the human world, reflects the means and relations of production, but the relation is by no means direct. For all practical purposes of artist and public, the situation for art at any given time is determined almost entirely by the problems posed by the most recent art, just as a chess-player's move responds to the situation of the game as the opponent's last move has left it.[17] Art then represents a strict but self-chosen necessity, submission to which is not alienation because it is our own free

choice first to enter the world of art and then at every point to make its problems our own. In fact, we invent its necessity by construing the history of art in such a way that only one direction for legitimate progress remains open; but that invention in turn is neither free nor alienated, because it follows directly from our will to take art seriously as imposing its own demands. In 1795, when the industrial revolution was only a cloud on the German horizon, the poet Schiller had declared that the world of art, in which the only necessity was that of the imagination, was the true domain of human freedom, and hence the only place where humanity was truly human.[18] What Adorno is arguing is that as our condition becomes ever more alienated we can preserve our humanity by making the necessities of the imagination ever more strict. Of course, art can have this value only if you take it more seriously than most of us want to. But then, desperate situations call for desperate remedies.

On Adorno's theory, only a harsh and difficult art will serve us in an age of alienation. Other thinkers, such as the Hungarian sociologist Ivan Vitányi, point out that such an art is not the only art we need.[19] If it is really true that alienation prevails in our society, the conditions of life must be such that few people are in any position to pursue the intricacies of high art. Such a society needs what it actually has, two different kinds of art: a high art that demands and repays close attention, and a low-pressure, undemanding art that will amuse and assuage, that will speak to everyday concerns, and that can accompany our distracted lives, affirming the basic humanity and community on which polarizations and bureaucratizations and other alienating factors are superimposed. Some people write as if these two kinds of art were rivals of each other, but they are not. Both are necessary, they have different functions and different qualities. To some extent, they have different publics, but not altogether so, since they meet different occasions and different needs and there is no reason why such occasions and needs should not occur within the compass of a single life. So it is equally foolish to decry the one as elitist or the other as mere entertainment.

Between the positions of Vitányi and Adorno is that of the Polish-Californian aesthetician Stefan Morawski.[20] Like Adorno, he contrasts real art, which demands serious attention, with mere entertainment, but, unlike him, he thinks that different forms of serious art can have different positive values in the lives of people whose experience of themselves is predominantly one of alienation and self-loss.

There are three kinds of art, he says, that speak to our condition and do something to heal it, in relation to the past, the present, and the future respectively. He calls them Orphic, Philoctetean, and Promethean. Orphic art is the art of harmony and inward order, which by its example of integrity sustains our own inner control and sense of balance. Philoctetean art relates us

healingly to our past, reaching within us the sources of the emotional unity we feel we have lost. And the forward-looking Promethean art inspires and invigorates us with the promise of unity restored. Orphic art includes most abstract art, art of strong design; Philoctetean art is art of expressive power and depth; and Promethean art, I suppose, would be art that relates imagination to the will. But what Vitányi thinks of as art for every day Morawski, like Adorno, thinks of as a parody of art, not offering healing but flattering with false comfort or facile cynicism; and beyond that again is the world of advertising and propaganda, which uses what should have been the resources of art as mere devices in the service of information or persuasion.

One difference between Adorno and Morawski is of particular interest to someone considering our general topic of art and culture today. Adorno thinks that in our alienated and manipulated age no happy or celebratory art is possible: any art that is not harsh and difficult must be a means to our seduction and enslavement, although in happier ages art could be happier too. But, though Morawski does not commit himself on this point, there is nothing in what he says to suggest that the art that is good for our alienated condition is any different from the art that would be good at other times. Whatever our condition, art that makes us secure in ourselves, faithful to our origins, and confident in our futures, must be good for us.

So much for our industrial age of alienation. What else is special about our times? Increasingly since the middle of the last century, with the successive development of mechanical and electronic means of reproduction and communication, we have been living in an age of the indiscriminate accessibility of information, of image overload, of the "museum without walls" whereby the art of all ages is accessible by proxy to anyone who wants it, but divorced from its context, sundered from its setting, and often denatured by being transformed in scale and turned into the mere content of a photograph.[21] As all art has become, for the first time in history, equally available, all art has become equally remote, cut off in principle from everyday understanding. Germaine Bazin has written how about the year 1800 the unprecedented admission of the public at large into the museums that had hitherto been the preserves of the initiate already generated the idea that art was something mysterious, remote, wonderful, cut off from everyday understanding, so that even a local artist could win acceptance only by pretending that he really belonged somewhere else, a changeling from fairyland.

In this situation, where all art is at once alien and present, and available in larger amounts and greater diversity than anyone could cope with, we must each devise strategies for keeping our bearings. The problem is not insoluble. It is like finding one's way around an unfamiliar department store or cafeteria, a similarly disorienting experience. At first we are confronted by bewildering

heaps of stuff, none of which seems quite real. But it doesn't take us long to develop strategies for finding our way around, for picking out what we want and ignoring what we don't, until in the end a familiar store becomes a constellation of well-known corners separated by what might as well be oceans of empty spaces. But my store is not your store: the counter that for me is an undifferentiated part of the desert between cigars and cameras is for you an oasis of batik. The world of art becomes a mosaic of network of intersecting mini-cultures in which we may devise our own cosmopolitanisms or irredentisms.

The information explosion has transformed the values we bring to art in ways that are hard to assess: some aspects of the situation we would like to welcome, some aspects we would like to resist, but we are often unsure whether what we would welcome and what we would resist are not the very same things. It is, on the one hand, splendid that most of us have some sort of access to the best that has been done: few of us get to Bayreuth, but most of us can listen to recordings made there. The greatest scholar of the eighteenth century knew less of Greek sculpture than any undergraduate knows today. How can that not be good? But, as a consequence, all cellists find themselves competing with Rostropovich, and not with Rostropovich as he plays in the concert hall but with Rostropovich filtered through microphones and amplifiers designed to fulfil the listener's daydreams, and the performance thus filtered will have been selected from several that contained perhaps more fluffs and less inspiration, and may even have been spliced together out of the best bits from several performances. How can any human cellist compete? Again, when I go to a concert by my local symphony orchestra I may hear one work by a living composer from my own country, but only because without such a work the Canada Council will withhold its grant; what I will certainly not hear will be what surely should be the staple fare at such a concert, namely something run up for the purpose by a home-town composer last week. Of course not. He would be competing with Beethoven. It is rather as if some process of cloning enabled the world's fastest sprinter to compete in every athletic event the world over. That would be the end of meaningful athletics. And one wonders if our contemporary universalism and perfectionism does not threaten the end of meaningful activity in the arts. Most of us who are not professionally concerned with conservatories of music and similar institutions are in constant danger of forgetting what art really is, of forgetting what we can expect from ourselves and each other.

At the same time, we lose sight of the distinction between what is universal and what is local in space and time. Or rather, we forget that what is universal is also of a specific place and time, and must be so. We see and hear the world's art as if it were the art of Utopia. There is a sense in which local composers do

not have to compete with Beethoven, because Beethoven is in no position to compete with them. Beethoven wrote for Vienna and for everywhere, for 1800 and for all time, but he could not write specifically for Edmonton in 1989. And if we think that nobody could do that because there is nothing special about Edmonton in 1989 to write for, that may only be because in losing the habit of making and hearing our own music we have lost a principal means of recognising ourselves.

No doubt, just as Vitányi said we need an art for comfort as well as an art for challenge, so we need an art that is for everyone as well as an art that is for ourselves alone. But this universal art may not be the same as the art that everyone talks about. In thinking about art and culture today, we must bear in mind that *today* connotes the ephemeral, and that is what is here today is likely to be gone tomorrow. When I get home at night and my family ask me what happened *today*, what I respond with is usually some trivial and amusing anecdote; the important things that happened are the things that happen every day, my routines of teaching and writing, and if I am remembered after I die it will be for those everyday things and not for the incidents I recall at suppertime.

So it is with art. The art magazines and even the art museum give a lot of space to certain modish artists, whose name everyone in the art world knows. Some of them do excellent and exciting things, but that is not why they make the headlines. They are celebrities because they are high-profile, what they do is easily described and recognised. It is for these people that the compilers of exhibition catalogues and the writers of weekly articles make large claims as to their connection with values today. Specifically, we are told what comment their work makes on today's civilization, or on the nature of art, or whatever it may be. The Bulgarian artist Christo wraps the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art in tarpaulin; Mark Prent fills a gallery with fibreglass replicas of corpses, each with Prent's own face. It's great stuff: breathtaking. But then the press agents tell us that Christo is denouncing our packaged society, or revealing the hollowness of the museum world, or something equally banal, and that Prent is showing us that we are all really dead, or something equally stupid. I would want to insist on two generalizations, which obviously I cannot substantiate, so I merely present them as my impressions which you may share or reject as your knowledge and judgment dictate. First, the value judgments that such works are said to derive their value from enshrining are always clichés, slick phrases without any relation to the grain of anyone's experience; and second, the association between those clichés and the works said to enshrine them is in every case absurdly loose and superficial, either depending on a facile analogy with the grossest aspects of a work's general character or else relying on nothing beyond the critic's personal say-

so.

The association of high-profile art with high-profile clichés is a mere public-relations phenomenon. The age of communications engenders within itself the age of publicity, and our 'today' is certainly that of the PR person, in which everything is slathered with a slime of self-serving verbiage. And what lends itself to such practices is what affords talking points, in the way that rock groups adopt gimmicks of nomenclature and costume to make their music distinctive.[22]

If the art that is pressed on us all by mass media and the institutions of the art market is high-profile art, how is it typically related to values today? Mostly, it serves a very real purpose: it gives us something to talk to each other about. Everyone knows about Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes, and if they don't—*we can easily tell them.* Such work affords some kind of symbol of public preoccupations, but beyond that we cannot go. We hear about it and talk about it, but we are unlikely to have seen it, and it certainly plays no part in the course of our lives. And a truly prophetic art, expressing and revealing the deepest values of our time, would attain such publicity only by coincidence. You and I are unlikely to hear about it, but our grandchildren will have heard about it.

I have gone too far, of course. The artists who get most talked about are not charlatans. Perhaps almost all of them are sincere, dedicated, professionally expert, brilliant. The people who sell them to us, like most of the most expensive advertisers, really do have a good product. Nor are the PR people and catalogue writers fools and liars: they are professionals with a sound knowledge of sheepishness and goathood. It is just that the evident result of their labours is a world where obviousness is obvious, and that such a world is no fit basis for a sensible person's trafficking with the arts.[23]

And what more shall we say about today's world? It is in a world in which we know how we look from the Moon. It is also a world in which we don't know how we look from the Earth. The externals of our lives are subjected to a great variety of immensely powerful factors of change of all kinds, interacting in ways no one can predict. Such an age clearly calls for at least three kinds of art, as Morawski said. We need the availability of a classical art for the security of origin, and in the standard repertory we have it. We need a communal art for the security of solidarity, and in TV network programming and pop music we have that. And we need a Promethean art for security against future shock, and in experimental art and anti-art we have that. So we have what we need, and I think we are pretty lucky.

And where, finally, does all that leave us? It leaves us, evidently, in a complicated situation. But, as I said at the start, if art expresses all of life in one way or another, the complexities of art cannot be radically less than those of life itself. That should not upset us. Each of us handles the intricacies of our

own life with great virtuosity. In fact, our nervous systems are set up to deal with subtle things better than they do with simple things (which is why logic, the simplest of all subjects, is so difficult).

Here, then, since one must make an end, is a thought to end with. Our dealing with art may show the same responsible freedom that we exercise in the conduct of our own lives. The high profile stuff is always there to talk about; the universal masterpieces are always there to sustain us; and it is only decent to take a sturdy interest in what is going on in the neighborhood. And then there is the immense mass of real art in all its diversity. Obviously no one could know it all or would be helped by doing so. Corresponding to this great mass of art is not one great public, but an interwoven multiplicity of mini-publics, choosing its favoured artists by propinquity or by a happy discovery of affinity. In fact, it's like marriage. Ideally, one marries one's soul-mate from all the world's millions; in our dreams, we marry the sexiest or richest or kindest person not yet spoken for. But in real life we marry the person we happen to marry, usually from the next street or the same graduating class, and the secret of happiness is to love the spouse you've got and not worry about the ones that got away. Or so they tell us. Similarly, the sensible way to deal with the profusion of the world's art is to ignore it. Find, if you can, one artist whose work speaks to you; follow that artist's work as it progresses, get to know it in detail, saturate yourself in its style. If you know one artist's work in that way you will know art itself, and an important way you will know more about art than if you had trudged through every museum in the world. And I would like to think, though I suspect it is not true, that if you really know and love the work of one artist, then when you do encounter the work of an artist whose work is not familiar to you, it will greet you with a welcoming smile, as the friend of a friend.

## Notes

1 The position is developed by Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin, St Louis, 1984. A typically insouciant expression of the point of view is that of Frederic Jameson: the justification of linguistic models and metaphors for cultural phenomena 'lies in the concrete character of the social life of the so-called advanced countries today, which offer the spectacle of a world from which nature as such has been eliminated. ...' He goes on to refer to 'that systematized and disembodied nightmare which is our culture today' (Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, Princeton, 1972, pp.viii-ix).

2 An audience member, identified as a sociologist, objected that I had omitted the sense of the term 'culture' most appropriate to his discipline: culture is that part of culture in this second sense that is value-free and (hence?) unconscious. I take it that the underlying idea is that what is really shared with all members of a group within which one's whole life is lived cannot be an object of choice and reflection because

it is that in terms of which all choices are made and all reflection is carried on. And that will include the entire repertoire of one's values and the resulting style of life. The point is a good one, if one does not object to saying that cultural values are value-free. But I do not think it really adds anything to what is said in the text.

3 I have more to say about the relevant concept of empire in 'Aesthetics and the End of Civilization', to appear in *Philosophic Exchange* in 1994.

4 I have heard it said that the Ontario government will not subsidize dance companies that devote themselves to the ethnic dances of their presumptive countries of origin. Presumably the government thinks that their raison d'être is not artistic but relates to the third of the senses of 'culture' here distinguished: at a Slobbovian cultural festival, after the mayor has congratulated everyone, it is time to call in what one official was heard to call 'the girls in red booties'. This sort of attitude may be what has prompted Joann Kealiinohomoku in a celebrated article to refer to ballet as the ethnic dance of western civilization ('An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance', in Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, eds, *What Is Dance?*, New York, 1983, pp.533-49). But her paper ignores the sort of distinction made in this paragraph, which relates to the cultural and political articulation of large-scale multicultural organizations.

5 Bertram Jessup and M. Rader, *Art and Human Values*, Englewood Cliffs, 1976.

6 The most familiar and best worked-out exposition of this integratedness of human lives is that of Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, Paris: Gallimard, 1943, trans. Hazel Barnes, London, 1956; but it is also one of the unifying themes in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially the treatment of 'practical wisdom' in Book VI.

7 This three-dimensionality is also established in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I ch.1.

8 Such an object is more likely to be found in the Royal Ontario Museum of Archeology than in the Art Gallery of Ontario. But why? Perhaps, some would say, only because in our society work in textiles is women's work and cannot be ranked with the arts assigned to males. But it is really not much easier to find convincing historical explanations than it is to find adequate justifications.

9 W.B. Yeats, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul', *Collected Poems*, second edition, London, 1950, p.267.

10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.5, aa. 3 and 4; Arthur Schopenhauer *The World As Will and Idea*, Book III, § 41.

11 This sort of argument is recommended by David Hume in his essay 'Of the Standard of Taste': 'But when we show him an avowed principle of art; when we illustrate this principle by examples, whose operation, from his own particular taste, he acknowledges to be conformable to the principle; when we prove, that the same principle may be applied to the present case, where he did not perceive nor feel its influence: He must conclude, upon the whole, that the fault lies in himself, and that he wants the delicacy, which is requisite to make him sensible of every beauty and every blemish, in any composition or discourse' (David Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, London, 1764, vol.1, p.263).

12 The language here suggests that this view of art embodies the aggressive and competitive viewpoint of a male-dominated society, not merely a more refined and exalted notion of what art is.

13 T. W. Adorno, *Dissonanzen: Musik in der Verwalteten Welt*, third edition,

Frankfurt, 1963.

14 Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos*, New York, 1965.

15 Paul Willis, 'Youth Groups in Birmingham and Their Specific Relation to Pop Music', in Irmgard Bontinck, ed., *New Patterns in Musical Behavior*, Vienna: Universal Edition, 1974, pp.108-13.

16 The anthropologist was Professor Kenelm O.L. Burridge of the University of British Columbia. My notes on his discourse contain no hint as to when and where he was speaking, but it was between 1976 and 1979.

17 Adorno seems to have cut the superstructure adrift altogether, but he salves his Marxian respectability by pointing out that the internal dialectic of art is fuelled by changes in the forces of production that constantly change the situation in which art is practised.

18 J.C.F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), trans. E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Oxford, 1967.

19 Ivan Vitányi, in an article in the Bontinck collection cited in note 15 above.

20 Stefan Morawski, *Inquiries Into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics*, Cambridge, 1974.

21 The standard exposition of this theme is Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility', in his *Illuminations*, New York: Schooken, 1969. The phrase 'museum without walls' is from André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, Princeton, 1978.

22 Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age*, trans. J. van N. Cahill, New York, 1967, p.160.

23 This public-relations phenomenon is not the same as the catastrophe identified by Arthur Danto. After remarking that the history of twentieth-century art is that of a series of upheavals, each of which he regards as a stage in 'an effort to identify the nature of art', and that (as many have observed) the effort died of exhaustion, he claims that the media misunderstood these changes as mere changes in fashion, with the result that 'an intense external demand for novelty in art' survived when there was no longer any internal reason for it. Thus 'ephemerality becomes almost a metaphor for the message' (Arthur C. Danto, *The State of the Art*, New York, 1987, pp.79-80).