

What's the Good?: Self-Critical Art and Aesthetic Value in a Hyperanimated World

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I

“At the bottom of the heart of every human being ... there is something that goes on indomitably expecting ... that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being. The good is the only source of the sacred. There is nothing sacred except the good and what pertains to it” (Simone Weil, *Human Personality*, 1943)¹

After the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel once asked himself: “Why do I write?” I write, he says, “in order not to go mad; or on the contrary, to touch the bottom of madness”. In our own tormented times, after September 11th, after Bali, after Beslan, can art conceive or enact anything redemptive, let alone reconciliatory, before the contorted face of tragedy? Why does the artist create? For Wiesel, the artist creates “to wrest [all] victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death”.²

Before such a presentiment we must ask whether the art of our day can be *trusted* with the Good. For if art is the impassioned reworking of our lives against the void - an ardent address to the incontrovertible coordinates of human destiny - then art, like Atlas, has a cosmic weight to bear. Even so, the Good in its contemporary dress appears fraught and endangered by a postmodern autonomy which insists on forceful, even brutal, modes of self-realisation. This has taken eclectic, confronting, and undiluted forms in the art of our times.

For example, we need only look indirectly at Damian Hirst's ‘Mother and Child Divided’ – a fully pregnant Friesian cow and her unborn calf, destroyed, severed in half, and placed in a glass tank of formaldehyde at the Tate Gallery; or at the performance artist, *Stelarc*, and his biomorphic self-manipulations resulting in the professed growth of a ‘third ear’ - to see

¹ Simone Weil, ‘Human Personality’, in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas. (New York: David McKay Company, 1977), p. 315.

² Elie Wiesel, ‘Why I write’, in *From the Kingdom of Memory. Reminiscences*, (New York: Summit Books, 1990), pp. 13, 21.

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the extremities to which some practitioners would lead us in marking our humiliation.³

It could be countered that such practices simply draw our attention to seemingly *permissible* actions in the name of art. Hirst's construction is viscerally distasteful, a maladjusted polemic, perhaps; Stelarc's, a comic mimesis. But is this the intended effect? If we take them as perpetrators or fabricators - and we are implicated by such a judgment - then what we are induced to see reinforces the spectacle we're reluctant to see. We might uncritically conjecture such art as dissimulating exoticism, the product of skewed imagination, except for fact that it masks a more deeply troubling trend in some current artistic practice - the body, anybody's compliant body, as ripe for vivisection.

Whither the good as sacred *within* every human, or animal, being? Whither the line between ethical responsibility - the use of a body, or bodily organ - and artistic freedom?

Against such a backdrop I interrogate the possibility of the Good in art. I look to the discipline of aesthetics - the philosophy *of/about* art - and certain metaphysical questions surrounding art practice in our hyperanimate age, in order to get some purchase on these asymmetries and forebodings in art's name.

II

Aesthetics treats of the nature of art and the character of our experience of art and of the natural environment. 'The aesthetic', so-called - from *aisthetēs* ('one who perceives') is connected with 'sensory experience' and the kinds of 'feelings' such experience arouses. Questions arise here: Is there a distinctive type of experience we may call aesthetic? Is there a special object of attention we call the aesthetic object? Is there an 'aesthetic attitude' toward works of art? Is there a distinctive 'aesthetic value' which we might contrast with moral, epistemic, or religious values? ⁴ I will have more to say on aesthetic value shortly.

Once upon a time the aesthetic impulse was considered an aspiration toward the beautiful and the true. Now this impulse in its contemporary guise wills into existence an *inalienable* art practice which defines itself in relation to - and often over against - the prevailing socio-cultural attitudes of the day. The aesthetic impulse has become *interrogatory*. Questioning is a good thing, we rightly say. But it must be pertinent to the task.

³ Damian Hirst is a much promoted *enfant terrible* of the contemporary art scene: the so-called 'Young British Artists' movement. *Stelarc* is an Australian performance artist based at the Arts Digital Research Unit, Nottingham Trent University, UK.

⁴ Susan L. Feagin, 'the Aesthetic', *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, (2nd Edition) ed. Robert Audi, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp 11-12.

In any conflicted environment a rigorous corrective of one kind or another eventually asserts itself. In the conflictual setting which is contemporary art, artists, critics, and aestheticians variously endorse the truths/untruths of much present-day art, and for theoretic and programmatic purposes. But the *epistemological* burden is to do so within the nexus of counter-aesthetic values. Here, significant art, historically and contemporaneously, carries a counter-dynamic of one kind or another. A counter-dynamic is a thrust toward – an exigency which fractures open – the hyperbole of obfuscation and complicity, whether in art or morals.

Indeed, any noteworthy aesthetic philosophy must not only adopt a critical position, validating the questioning artistic personality; it must also disclose the space wherein the conscientious artist can become a 'truth-teller' within the community. It can encourage a social engagement with art by means of created works which *challenge* or *provoke*, albeit in the interests of truth: *a-letheia*, truth's 'deconcealing'. This domain of invocation – and of potential *kenosis* (or 'self-emptying') – may yet become a vehicle for cultural rectitude, exemplified in the artist who assigns his/her work to the restoration of the human spirit in its life-affirming properties: by being a marker of those provocations of the Good which take the shape of *humane* virtue.

The crucial task before us is to regain our sense of the truth-telling capacity of an artist's being – a deeply intimate way of going about a formally critical task – and to substantiate art's essential 'way of being' in the world as a transforming aesthetic value. Alongside the formalisms of thought, how is this to be achieved at a practical level?

Art – deep down – has the capacity to *transform* the experience we have of ourselves and of the world. Ideally, it does so by drawing us in, and raising us up. Art *draws us in* by our natural attraction toward the uniqueness of created objects – things which in themselves are qualitatively distinct from all other objects we perceive in the world. Art has a capacity to *raise us up* – to elevate our sensibilities – by its direct appeal to our mental, emotional, and spiritual lives. And great art arouses in us a response of gratitude, even awe. We say of such art that it has *gravitas* – and we *feel it* when we come to know it. We can all think of examples. Great art encapsulates something of the truth-riven nature of life and of our lives. This is its 'greater' good.

In the contemporary order we must investigate whether any truth-telling capacity can foster a self-critical art practice which seeks to transform human aspiration. And is there the possibility of an ethical 'face-to-faceness' with created realities which might signal a renewed apprehension of art and art-making to move us *toward* the Good? Let us see.

III

In aesthetic circles it is customary to think that art is the outward representation of an artist's inner being or of some indefinable feature of this being which, if it were not for the powers of artistic expression, or the persuasions of aesthetic judgment, would have no real means of commending itself to human appreciation. That art is a *phenomenology* of sorts certainly lends itself to metaphysical and aesthetic inquiry.

From an artist's point of view, art is concerned with communicating those internalised responses of his being toward outward reality which remain untranslatable other than in *created* terms. Art is created out of an artist's perceptual faculty – from some secreted percept in his/her mind's eye - seeking outward expression in works of art. We say, *works of art*, as if art itself were some mysterious terrain from which, with the artist's divination, art's workings somehow enter existence. It is significant that Martin Heidegger conceived art to be *the origin* of both artist and work, since neither artist nor work was intelligible without their grounding in this palpable domain of art. Art is, then, and through the agency of an artist's working consciousness, the principal locus and means of art's happening.

It might be argued that art is simply one very specialized mode of declamatory cultural address. If so, then it seems reasonable to attempt a reappraisal of the means art *now* possesses to impart the good through deliberative action. Such action concerns the import and power of *ideas* and their transmission through works of art. Here Donald Kuspit's dictum is apposite: ideas are simultaneously created and discovered. Art-making, which is itself the sensings of place and the placing of sensations, enables the artist to transmogrify ideas into *practices*.

Moreover, it should be recognised that the basis for all art-historical and art-theoretical criticism – and all aesthetic theories about art - is art practice itself: which is to say, *no practice - no history, no theory*. Indeed, we learn to look to the art of the past in concert with our own historical moment, to comprehend the irreducible upsurge of the contemporary visible in our so-called technocratic and post-metaphysical age: one characterized by an escalating incidence of the virtual and the hyper-real - something which challenges artistic agency, its psycho-affective values, material processes and forms.

IV

In this respect, as Jean François Lyotard reminds us, it is more and more incumbent upon the artist today to adopt a *critical position*.⁵ Lyotard

⁵Jean François Lyotard, 'On Theory', in *Driftworks* ed. Roger McKeon (London: Foreign Agents Series, 1984), p.31.

submits that there will always be a difference between theorists and practitioners at the level of critique within the arts; and that is a good thing, he says, because "theorists have everything to learn from artists, even if the latter won't do what the former expect; so much the better in fact, for theorists need to be practically criticised by works that disturb them".⁶

What is required of our thinking about art is a kind of existential interrogation, a clarification of origins for thought and practice at the level of human symbolic exchange: the kind of interchange which takes place when theory turns toward practice in order to learn from it.

Furthermore, what is at stake in such a setting is the critically denatured character of our *seeing*: those subtle ways in which power ideologies and mass-market forces fashion vision, and its social construct *visuality*, as protocols of psycho-cultural containment. In such a climate we need to reclaim those dimensions of life which remain under threat of attack or even erasure: the subjection under the aegis of contemporary culture of what Charles Altieri has called 'principles of presence', 'self-determining objectivity', 'lyrical self-celebration' and 'all dreams of self-possession'.⁷ It is precisely these indefinable human qualities which need to be harnessed in the renewal of cultural criticism and social change.

We need to address the forces opposed to what Altieri calls 'psycho-social intimacy', and to counter the problematic translation of that intimacy into 'the arbitrary, the mechanical and the simulacral'.⁸ How can this be effected? Certainly it requires a moral stance of the artistic intelligence: an ability to recognize the ambiguities *and* opportunities of the contemporary situation in order to affirm our interdependency as makers and thinkers in the realm of created meaning.

The discipline of existential phenomenology offers scope for such reflection. I will give an overview of the ways in which it may inform our intellectual and practical activity as artists and philosophers as we engage the multifaceted contemporary visible.

V

My aim is to explore certain phenomenological insights into the nature of perception, something which is embedded in the visual *per se* and in work-a-day consciousness, and to investigate how the artist may be understood as the conceptual and material articulator of works of art. The phenomenological critique may even yield an aspiration toward what might

⁶ Lyotard, *Driftworks*, p. 31.

⁷ Charles Altieri, 'Frank Stella and Jacques Derrida: Toward a Postmodern Ethics of Singularity', in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, eds. P. Brunette and D. Wills (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.168.

⁸ Altieri, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, p. 170.

be called 'the perceptual Good'. But first, we must begin with the perceiving body: with the somatics of sentient life.

The human body is incarnated in the world, and perceptual experience is predicated upon it as an embodied entity. In his essay, *Eye and Mind*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives us an image of the artist's body intercorporeal with the world. He says that the artist *takes his body with him*: "it is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into [works of art]". To understand these transmogrifications, he says, "we must go back to the working, actual body, [to] that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement".⁹

Moreover, the artist's vision is not a view superimposed on an *outside*; neither is it a mere physical-optical relation with the world. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty writes: "[t]he world no longer stands before [the artist] through representation"; instead "it is the [artist] to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible".¹⁰ This is so because things have an *internal equivalent* in the body.

These inner equivalencies give rise to a 'second order of the visible: *shapes or images*, in that an icon or essence appears which represents the first or primal order of things. It is as if this first-order of the visible arises internally within the artist only to be projected back again into externality as second-order representation - in the form of an image or shape. But an artist's representations, whether literal or abstract, are never in their essence merely re-presentations of reality. An artist's representations must faithfully account for reality as he/she uncovers and experiences it in all its polymorphic intensities.

VI

One of the complexities embedded in contemporary art practice is precisely how this second order of the visible can be devoid of *oppressive simulacra* – a shadowy likeness, a deceptive substitute, a mere pretence - if this first order of the visible and its internal correspondences have been jettisoned from view.

I am thinking of the kind of contemporary *performance art* which immobilises the body as first order representation in favour of micro-technical effects: the effectology of the performing artist, Stelarc, mentioned earlier, and other proponents of the body as *technologicistic*. Here there is an implicit claim to have enhanced the body's interactive potential

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1961/1964), p. 162.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 181.

through computerised intelligences, where mechanized insertions into the artist's bodily *topos* mirror or control its movement.

Such a body is reduced, it seems to me, to a state of passive compliance through obedience to simulated methods of cybernetic command. Such a condition suggests, by a kind of subterfuge, what Terry Eagleton questions: "that the body must be somehow *marked* or *signed* in order to enter narrative, [to] pass from brute fact to active meaning".¹¹ However, restitution of the body as a creative sensory field may be possible for performance practice if it were to once again enjoin *the living body*: conjugating the powers of vision and representation as they double over each other in transformative projection. Such practice would stand instructed about itself by just such a repossession of the doubling conjunction of brute fact *and* active meaning. Indeed, we see something of the potency of this doubling in the vital actualities of mime theatre and dramatic dance.

Moreover, defenders of postmodern art speak of the ways in which assemblage art, installation and multi-media art (video, audio, and film art), and certain modes of performance art, manages to reinstate an understated motif at the organisational centre of its perceptual field, such that new resonances, balances and tensions emerge, thus saving its composition, or *design*, as Altieri would have it, from 'willfulness' or mere 'ornamental status'.¹²

Such practice is not necessarily a drive toward obscurity, nor is it a will to 'enigma', to 'unintelligibility' or to 'uninterpretability', as Kuspit has claimed.¹³ Rather, authentic art practice - which demonstrates a will to aesthetical veracity - is also the practice which finds a legitimate place for the *illogical* and *irrational*: such practice takes our reason and aesthetic judgment to a threshold where artworks take on nonobjective values and unrecognized meanings: that is to say, of art's power to configure itself through the contingent mental spaces of theoretical discourse.

Postmodern art has a demonstrative physicality and a distinct morphology. It tends to define an *eruptive* space: those ways in which the placing of heterogenous elements - found objects, ready-mades, human artefacts - concedes a certain perceptual density to vision through their approximating relations - as in assemblage or installational art. Such works are a proximity of elements within some broader ideational envelopment, whether in the small box-like containments of the Polish artist Mateusz

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, 'Body Work', in *The Eagleton Reader*, ed. Stephen Regan, Blackwell Publishers, UK, 1998, p. 160.

¹² Charles Altieri, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, pp. 168-187.

¹³ Donald Kuspit, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 114-120.

Fahrenholz, for example, or the exploded assemblage environs of the British artist Cornelia Parker.¹⁴

Fahrenholz takes old photographs as starting points and attempts to “recreate sections of the past to understand feelings of loss and displacement”. The connected idea of *exile*, he says, “develops into themes of travel and movement of peoples e.g. the sea as both a bridge and divide with feelings of uncertainty”.¹⁵ For Fahrenholz, it might be said, the space of assemblage is a vehicle for an examination of personal attachment to the objects of the past transmuted by memory or imagination in the present. Parker’s work is concerned with formalizing things or experiences beyond our rational control: by “containing the volatile and making it into something that is quiet and contemplative like ‘the eye of the storm’”¹⁶. For Parker, it could be said, found objects and artefacts become the contested ritual site of an exuberant confession.

But how are such approximating relations – the underlying elements of a formally articulated work of art - connected to the sensory nature of phenomenological perception?

VII

Perceptually speaking, we can identify the sensory visible. But there is also the sensory *in-visible* – phenomenology’s invisible lining (or membrane) of the visible. This in-visible resists our attempts to seize it. The in-visible appears *only* within the visible. Further, we could say that this in-visible inner lining of the visible is precisely the means by which an artwork *holds-to-itself*.

In this respect, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, speaks of an artwork bearing the very private and intimate singularity of ‘the one who must make it’: the artist. Such a singularity makes its entry so as to “find its justification in the work and reveal the law in it, like an inborn drawing that is invisible until it emerges in the transparency of the artistic”.¹⁷ That is to say, such a work has an *inborn line* which is invisible until it issues in the crystal transparency of its image.

But how is this in-visible to be apprehended in ways which might instruct contemporary art? And what scope is there for the artist to be released from art’s self-absorbing tendencies – and in the interests of some perceptual cleansing?

¹⁴ Cornelia Parker, and Mateusz Fahrenholz, cited in *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*. (London: Art and Design Profile, No 40), pp. 9-17, and pp. 87-95.

¹⁵ Quotes from www.Mateusz.Fahrenholz.com - Fahrenholz’ webpage.

¹⁶ Quotes from www.frithstreetgallery.com concerning Parker’s current work.

¹⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Letters on Cézanne*, ed., Clara Rilke, (United Kingdom: Vintage Edition, 1907), p. 5.

If this in-visible were to be acknowledged as the bearer of socio-perceptual relations, then we must rigorously examine those contemporary cultural productions which draw on a totalising principle: the seduction of *the image* as source of talismanic power. Here contemporary aesthetic discourse must question the kind of technocratic production which, in practice, disregards the in-visible.

My meaning is to suggest that the *thematics* of contemporary art could lead to the inception of a rejuvenated philosophy of perception: a philosophy no longer enthralled by what Véronique Fôti has called, "the ideals of conceptual grasp, intellectual mastery, and technical manipulation"; but rather, one which is prepared to seriously question "the unmotivated and irreducibly complex upsurge of a world *which is not matter or in-itself*".¹⁸

Here philosophy begins to learn that the study of art can teach us to understand the world as 'non-philosophy', as Hugh Silverman describes it¹⁹: and by non-philosophy is meant a decentering of philosophy: of an access to Being which is characterised by art-making in the multiplicity of its significations, and which it is the co-task of aesthetics to take to the spatiality of perception: that innate compositional spatiality which the artist celebrates as equiprimordial with thought.

It may be said that just as vision for the artist is a perception of what is *already there* - the given to be perceived - a work of art comes *to be* among the already there. It is due to 'depth' - the relations of proximity and envelopment - that things are *substantial* - that they 'have a flesh', as Merleau-Ponty puts it. And yet, things held in depth have a *reserve*, so to speak: they oppose our sight and inspection by way of a resistance which is uniquely their own openness. Within phenomenological depth created works *open-out* our gaze: their already-there-ness remaining in an openness which resists - but also solicits - our sight. The resistance of a created thing is its *distinctness*: its being already there. Remaining steadfast in being-there, an artwork offers itself to human assignation: to the circumstances of a secret or propitious address.

VIII

In the 1980s Craig Owens once claimed that the postmodern artwork unsettled the stability of the modernist mastering position: its authority was not based on its uniqueness or singularity, he said, but on modern aesthetics' attribution of the universal forms "utilized for the representation

¹⁸ Véronique M. Fôti, 'The Dimension of Color', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, eds., G. Johnson and M. Smith, (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 294.

¹⁹ Hugh J Silverman, 'Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger: Interpreting Hegel', in *Inscriptions: After Phenomenology and Structuralism*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 133.

of vision”²⁰; and this beyond any differences in content due to the production of works in actual historical conditions. Not only does postmodernist work claim no such authority for itself, Owens argues; it is intent on undermining it - hence “its generally deconstructive thrust”.²¹

Contemporary art now claims another index for itself: its *aleatoric* or ‘random’ character: so that what is introduced is a disruptive or discordant mechanism, the aesthetic effects of which postpone or cancel judgment along Owensian lines.

Contemporary art has moved away from a determined conceptual stance to one of avowed *interactivity*. Contemporary artists have been induced to leave the solitude of their studios and engage with the social order. Such artists now deal with a demanding repertoire of social tools and art institutional prerogatives in exhibiting their work. Definable public space has now become the artist’s studio *en plein-air* – an overt mode of being and making. Of course, interactivity, which should mean time for people to reflect on what is before them in conducive environs, is axiomatic to the artist who wants to ‘create an audience’, as Paul Klee once said.

Here we need a *discourse* which recognizes the artist’s perception as mover and shaper of his/her creations. Inasmuch as discourse is the articulation of social and cultural forces as they find expression in individual practices, then discourse constitutes a critique of power, whether of art or life.

By contrast, the discourse of the postmodern aesthetic arguably has its origins in the modern idea of the aesthetic; something which, as D. N. Rodowick claims, took its rise from “the systematic retreat in philosophy from understanding the social and historical meanings of representational practices”. Rodowick locates a certain interiorizing of human subjectivity which identifies discourse with “speech and pure thought, as distinguished from external perceptions derived from nature”.²² Which is to say, a certain privileging of discourse over the senses occurs in accounting for the subjective aspects of our experience of the world.

In thus addressing postmodernism’s speech and pure thought, the evident *materiality* of an artist’s discourse must be permitted to forge open-handed aesthetic values, so that we learn to interrogate those practices which are at odds with themselves.

²⁰ Craig Owens, ‘The Discourse of Others’, in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, (United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 1988), p. 58

²¹ Owens, ‘The Discourse of Others’, pp. 58-59.

²² D. N. Rodowick, ‘Impure Mimesis or the Ends of the Aesthetic’, in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, eds. Peter Brunette and David Wills, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 96-97.

Furthermore, a Heideggerian intuition could influence contemporary art practice if it were to insist on the restitution of a work's 'work-being': transmuting sensory things into visionary engagement. And so whether a work of art is of a visual, literary, or performative nature, it should assume its own *ontic weight* in the perceptual field and be open to humanising critical reflection. Whereas the contemporary historical moment is one of conflictual truth and heterogeneous appearances, the artist is one who remains to mould this world's latent meanings and undisclosed truths.

Finally, what is the link between *the aesthetic* and *value*? And what is the relation between aesthetic value and the Good in the context of contemporary art?

IX

The term value is defined as "the worth, desirability, or utility of a thing, or the qualities on which these depend"; or "the ability of a thing to serve a purpose or cause an effect"; and "one's principles or standards [about] what is valuable or important in life" (OED). This is a wide-ranging description of the word value concerning the judgment of things. Value is the attempt to give some appreciative weight to perceptible objects and events. Aesthetic value engages our attention regarding what is actual and enduring in the realm of created meaning.

In relation to created objects, Susan Feagin says that three responses are feasible: *disinterestedness*, that our experience of an artwork should not be determined by its possible practical uses; *distancing*: separating oneself from one's personal concerns in relating to an object; and *contemplation*: viewing the object as an object of sensation, 'as it is in itself', for its own sake, unaffected by the cognition or knowledge we may have of it. Questions arise here over whether there is, or can be, such a thing as an aesthetic attitude; whether we can really know 'the thing in itself' such that it brings about an aesthetic experience. It is argued that there are no purely *sensory* experiences divorced from any cognitive content at all.²³ Thus diverse views have arisen.

The issue of aesthetic value and the good in relation to contemporary art has a range of probable responses. Our preoccupation here is with the ethico-aesthetical nature of contemporary art's *experimentation*.

For his part, Lyotard speaks of today's art as an exploration of things *unsayable* and *invisible*. The diversity of present-day artistic propositions is dizzying, he says. "What philosopher can control it from above and unify it?" And yet, he says, "it is through this dispersion that today's art is the

²³ Susan L. Feagin, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, pp 12-13.

equal of being as the power of things possible, or the equal of language as the power of plays”²⁴

I would argue that the postmodernity of art's dispersions has given way to contemporaneous profusions, where each experimentation is taken as a subjective perspective on Being which knows, nor speaks, no one language, but which is exposed to the raw, plural, and multiple human interchanges discoursed upon it in the name of being. Such philosophy knows its own incompleteness, because it cannot conclude upon the infinite constructions of contemporary art without risking defining itself as a system of control, much less of mediation, from above.

If contemporary art seems overburdened with *self-proclamation* – those ways in which artists disengage from the project of self-criticism – then a striving after some kind of ‘perceptual good’ may offer a corrective: a speech of encounter with art which mirrors back to ourselves something of Heidegger’s sense of a work’s ‘coming-to-presence’ and ‘abiding’; and of an earthing of art amidst the competing forces of politicized visualities. Here the contemporary artist can begin to work within freely chosen parameters only by occupying some outpost of thought and practice which portends a clearer view. For it is what remains *unthought* for art that poses an existential challenge *to art*.

Exposing a Nietzschean proposition that art is the fundamental occurrence of *all being*, and that being is a ‘self-creating’, the artist remains, for David Farrell Krell, one in whom the struggle against atomistic experience can only be by way of indirection. For since “the artist’s creative life [is] ruled by a yes-saying response to the chaos of Becoming ... the achievement of art shatters the subject-object relation, [and thus fuses] worker and work”.²⁵ Such is an artist’s self-production, Krell declares.

But if an artist’s self-production also implies self-critique, then his/her art making must learn to resist those market forces which promote the coercions of the image as ‘style’ – an *anti-praxis*, of sorts, which is mirrored in the excesses of art theory.

By contrast, the task of an emancipatory art practice is to reinstate an artist’s self-forgetfulness – a veritable *kenosis* (‘self-emptying’) of the mind and affections. This is a practice which not only proposes the artwork as a perceptual good, a vivifying reality, but also the greater good of the aesthesiological community. Such art is the movement of sensory man toward a foundational cultural belonging. It is the projected hope of a new

²⁴ Lyotard, *Driftworks*, p. 31.

²⁵ David Farrell Krell, ‘Art and Truth in Raging Discord: Heidegger and Nietzsche on the Will to Power’, in *Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature: Toward a Postmodern Literary Hermeneutics*, ed. William V. Spanos, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 40-41

cultural self-possession which may yet challenge the present-day artist to fashion the marrow of his art into clear-sighted vision.

Human creativity presupposes an amalgam of living experiences, aesthetic judgements and ethical interchanges – factors which come into play whenever the domain of art opens itself to cultural reflection. If creativity is something existent and alive in the experience of human beings at the personal and social levels, we are nevertheless faced with a mysterious set of expectations and desires which are not readily accessible in their deeper meanings and vital resonances.

Here cultural critique cannot delimit the idiosyncratic features of human experience. Instead, critique should be imbued with empathic regard for the otherness of another's cultural being. Here culture is not simply an aggregate of those astonishing ways in which we clothe passionate human realities and ethical concerns. Rather, the *human face* of culture can be of a reinstating kind: shaped by the invisibilities at its heart, and in the expansiveness of metaphoric and symbolic invention.

When all is said and done, the concept of the perceptual good remains the germ of an idea seeking domicile in practicable thought. If such a good were to be borne anew in our times, it must be supported at the pivots of our thought; for only where self-critique, aesthetic value, and ethical labour meet do we invest ourselves wholeheartedly in culture.

Finally, can the art of our day be trusted with the Good? Here there remains the forecast of an ethical 'face-to-faceness' with created realities – perhaps, a Levinasian face-to-faceness with 'the other' obligating a responsible me in the appreciation of persons and the use of things; something which may yet signal a renewed art-making inclined toward – and even embracing – the good. Part of this ethical incentive will be our shared venture toward the things of the world – so as to *uncover their sense*. Thus we may be taken toward a space, as Hugh Silverman believes, in which perception "reassumes its fundamental power of showing forth more than itself".²⁶ It remains the compelling task of the artist to account for this 'more-than-itself' of perception – its superabundance – through aesthetical engagement with the wider world, just as it is an exigency for the artist to work toward some deeper good through the gratuities of created work.

²⁶ Hugh J Silverman, *Inscriptions*, p. 133.