

Art and Philosophy

On a recent trip to New York City to attend the opening of a Cuban art exhibition organized by Glexis Novoa, an artist and a curator whose work my wife and I admire, we decided to take the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). When we arrived we saw advertised an exhibition of the work of Martín Ramírez in the Museum of Folk Art, located next to the MoMA. We had seen pictures of Ramírez's work before and had been intrigued by them, so we decided to go in.

Ramírez was a Mexican laborer who came to the United States to work on the railroad. After years of struggles, he ended up in a mental institution, where he was diagnosed as catatonic schizophrenic. He did not talk, but he drew and painted pictures on any pieces of paper he could find. His work is a stream of trains, tunnels, cowboys, *campesinos*, city escapes, and virgins. The human figures usually are trapped in buildings and cells from which escape seems impossible. Visually, the work is appealing to some audiences and disturbing to others, but it is difficult not to be moved by it.

Approximately ninety pieces were displayed in the exhibition, roughly one fourth of the extant work from the artist. After two hours of marveling at the stunning character of the art, we were on our way to the elevators, when my wife, who, unlike me, frequently strikes up casual conversations with strangers, said to one of the guards: "Not bad for a nut, don't you think?" The guard responded with quite a bit of animation: "Nut? No, this guy was not crazy at all! He knew more about life than we do." This was unexpected and serious, so I told Norma, "Let's go back, we better take another look at these pictures."

The guard had struck a chord. He had made us realize that Ramírez's pictures were not just what they looked like; there was something deeper, and perhaps disturbing, in them. Until that point I had been looking at the work in formalist terms, as striking images devoid of a philosophical dimension, but the guard's comment awakened me to a different perspective, which also contrasted with the commentary on the works presented at the exhibition. The curators had done a fine job of assembling opinion about Ramírez. A

psychologist spoke about Ramírez's mental condition, and whether he was in fact schizophrenic. A sociologist discussed the social factors that influenced the work. An art historian located the art in a historical context. And the person who discovered Ramírez narrated the story of the discovery and how the art establishment had first turned its back on the work. All of this was interesting and useful, but one thing was missing: the philosophy, which is what the comment from the guard suggested. He had given a brief, but significant, interpretation of the philosophical relevance of the work: it was about life and it showed a kind of knowledge and wisdom sometimes lacking in contemporary society. And indeed, upon reflection it reveals the human condition, its loneliness and *angst*.

If this is not a philosophical interpretation, then what is? But how could it be taken seriously? What did it add to what the psychologist, sociologist, art historian, and biographer had said? And was it significant, or should it be dismissed merely as a reaction of no consequence, by a person without proper credentials? The guard had, in quite simple terms, posed for me a most interesting philosophical question, the relation between philosophy and art, and the consequent issue of the viability and significance of philosophical interpretations of art.

Philosophy has seldom ignored art. Questions about the nature of art go back to the very beginning of the discipline, to Plato in particular, and modern and contemporary philosophers have devoted considerable time and effort to the exploration of philosophical problems that arise in the context of art. Such topics as the essence of the aesthetic, the nature of representation and its role in art, the relation between form and content, the significance of abstraction, and many others are common throughout the history of philosophy. Recently there has been substantial interest in the cognitive and epistemic issues raised by art, especially painting.¹ And the use of artists and their works as sources of philosophical reflection related to the philosophy of art is common. However, it has been comparatively rare in the history of philosophy to find authors who have found in visual art in particular, the source of philosophical inspiration quite apart from issues in aesthetics, such as the problems of free will and determinism, predestination, or the nature of reality.

The twentieth century saw an increase in these latter sorts of discussions. Consider, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre's speculations about distance and emptiness in the context of Giacometti, Jacques Derrida's use of two of Goya's paintings to philosophize about the colossal, Gilles Deleuze's ruminations about sensation based on the work of Francis Bacon, or Michel Foucault's employment of Velásquez's *Las Meninas* to raise questions about the role of representation in Western epistemology.² Among the most famous philosophers who have made use of visual art in their philosophy are Walter

Benjamin (Klee), Martin Heidegger (van Gogh), and Michel Foucault (Magritte).³ Still, this is not as frequent as the use of art as a locus for the discussion of aesthetic issues. Most philosophical analyses of art aim to explain what philosophers think artists are doing and to tell us how to view something as art, in addition to providing answers to other issues that arise from the consideration of art.⁴ And many of those who use works of art to address philosophical problems seem to do so as loci for the discussion of these problems largely independently of the philosophical take a work of art might have or the philosophical understanding of the views of the artist who made it or the audience that confronts it. When Deleuze was asked if the aim of his book on Bacon was to make readers better see the artist's paintings, he agreed that it would have that effect if it were successful, but he added that it had a higher aspiration, "to approach something that would be the common ground of words, lines, colors, and even sounds."⁵ In short, his primary aim was to achieve a sound philosophical view of art rather than to enlighten us about Bacon's work in particular.

Indeed, many interpretations of art that are presented as philosophical can be disputed because they do not seem to be truly philosophical, or because they do not appear to be interpretations properly speaking, or even because the artistic credentials of their objects are questionable. This is not as frequent with philosophical interpretations of other cultural phenomena or other kinds of interpretations of art. It is easy to find philosophical interpretations of literature, such as the speculations that Jorge Luis Borges's stories have elicited.⁶ And psychological interpretations of art, even of the great masters of the Renaissance, abound.⁷ The battle between "philosophers" and "poets" goes back to the beginning of philosophy, but it is particularly acrimonious when it concerns philosophy and the visual arts.

The reverse also is true. Much visual art seems to have little to do with philosophy, and many artists, art critics, and even philosophers have argued that it should not have anything to do with it, or, if it does, then this is not a source of value in it but may be detrimental. Still, there can be little question that much visual art involves philosophy. Consider, for example, Raphael's *School of Athens*, Goya's *The Executions of the Third of May 1808*, Picasso's *Guernica*, and Estévez's *Irreversible Processes*. In the *School of Athens*, Raphael presents us with a kind of summary of ancient Greek philosophy, with two central contending philosophical views, the Platonic and the Aristotelian: Plato signals upward, presumably to the world of transcendent ideas, whereas Aristotle points downward, toward the empirical world of experience. In *The Executions of the Third of May 1808*, Goya provides a stark condemnation of the executions carried out by the French and thus voices a cry for national freedom. Picasso's *Guernica* is nothing if not an exposé of the horrors of war and the inhumanity of which humans are capable. And Estévez's *Irreversible*

Processes poses the problem of freedom and determinism: although we seem to be in control of some of our actions, others are clearly beyond it.

Philosophy and art have not had an easy life together. Beginning with Plato, there has been a philosophical tradition that has regarded art with suspicion, often as even dangerous. For Plato, art in general interferes with the grasp of truth and the nature of reality. Artworks are far removed from the real and constitute obstacles in understanding how things truly are because of their engagement with the senses and emotions at the expense of the intellect. A painting is a copy of an idea the artist has, which is itself a copy of objects in the world of experience, which are in turn copies of the real objects of knowledge, Plato's notorious ideas. The Myth of the Cave, presented in *The Republic*, dramatically illustrates this view by showing how the artifacts that humans construct, as well as their shadows projected on a wall, are the objects we see in the obscurity of our existence on earth, where we are surrounded by appearances far removed from the reality represented by the sun and the objects it illumines outside of the cave.⁸

On the opposite side are authors who regard art as something much loftier than philosophy. In the nineteenth century in particular, with the rise of Romanticism and the reaction against the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason, some authors placed art on a pedestal and devalued philosophy. The true way of grasping reality, of understanding ourselves and the world, they argued, was through emotion, not reason. Viewed as an effective trigger of emotion, art became exalted, and philosophy, as a discipline of knowledge that relies on rational discourse, came to be considered rather a lower means of enlightenment. The analysis proper to philosophical thinking kills what it analyzes—it terminates life in order to examine it—whereas art fully preserves its object. Art is not philosophy, and to try to project philosophy into it and use it in art results in the destruction of art.

Why such resistance to putting together art and philosophy? The answer is not difficult to surmise. For one, both of the approaches mentioned tend to rely heavily on a sharp distinction between emotion, on the one hand, and rational, discursive thought, on the other. Emotion often has been viewed as a matter of sensation and feeling, whereas reason has been regarded as having to do with cognition and propositional thought, although this opposition has not gone unchallenged, and many philosophers argue that emotion includes an important cognitive dimension.⁹ Leaving the controversy over the nature of emotion aside, however, at least four other areas are used to contrast art and philosophy and to argue that it is impossible to put them together: medium, means, end, and practitioners.

The argument based on the medium is frequently used in the context of visual art. The favorite medium of philosophy and the favorite medium of visual art differ substantially, indicating a serious rift between them. The main

medium of philosophy is language, but it is not for visual art, even though from time to time visual art does use language and there are traditions in which writing is considered high art. Writing as art is common in the East, and it is arguable that it also has been practiced in the West, particularly in the Middle Ages. Still, plastic artists do not generally use words but instead turn to materials and objects that they manipulate in various ways. A sculptor might use marble, a painter paints, and drawing usually requires pencil and paper. Visual art is tied very closely to the material process of production. Painting, for example, seems to be concerned with mixing and diluting materials. There is something alchemic about it, as James Elkins has argued, it is “a kind of immersion in substances.”¹⁰ Indeed, in the interview included in the Appendices, Estévez uses the language of alchemy to describe the way he works: “even the feeling of my drawings is . . . material, because I confront the paper as alchemists used their sketch books.” On the contrary, philosophers practice their craft with words almost exclusively, used either orally or in writing.¹¹ And although it is true that philosophers have from time to time expressed their ideas in poetry, and poetry is a kind of art, even then the medium they use seems far removed from the favorite medium of the visual arts.

Philosophers talk to each other, or even to themselves, and they write about what they think, whereas visual artists turn to images, perceptual effects, and material objects and substances. And when artists use words in their art, they have to sort their status, because, as Danto has pointed out, “words are both vehicles of meanings and material objects.”¹² Indeed, painters often use words nonlinguistically, because, as Foucault put it, “the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. . . . Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.”¹³

The argument against the marriage of philosophy and art based on the medium derives further substance from the fact that visual artists do not, on the whole, produce treatises; they do not write articles; they do not give lectures; and they do not engage in discussion and argument when they function as artists. It is unusual to have an artist respond to the work of another artist, who in turn responds to it, in the way philosophers do. This kind of dialogue, which is essential to philosophy, is missing in visual art. Philosophers regularly produce dialogues—think of the paradigmatic work of Plato—and they engage in disputation and argument with each other. The centerpiece of medieval philosophy, for example, is the oral disputation, which only eventually was put down on parchment. To this day, dialogue and disputation are fundamental in the discipline, as any gathering of philosophers will prove, whereas the identity of a visual work of art depends very much on elements that are not words and of non-linguistic elements in the words

the work may use.¹⁴ When plastic artists use words, they do not seem to be concerned with the logic of thinking but with the way words contribute to an overall image. This brings me to the second area that is used to argue against putting art and philosophy together, the means.

The principles that guide philosophers in their craft involve reasoning and logic; they provide structure to their discourse. Philosophers examine claims about the world made by others and themselves, and they subject these claims to scrutiny, frequently finding fault with them. They do this by examining the evidence offered and by subjecting the arguments given in their favor to the test of logic. Philosophical treatises contain such things as the presentation and explanation of theses, the examination of evidence and arguments provided for them, the evaluation of such evidence and arguments, and the development of arguably better alternative views and arguments.

Aristotle, for example, takes issue with Plato's view, that the way to explain knowledge is by reference to a world of ideas independent of experience and located in a realm of their own. The Platonic explanation of how we know triangularity is not through our perception of individual triangles, because none of them fits exactly the definition of a triangle; we know triangularity because we have direct access to the idea of triangularity, independent of our experience. Aristotle then proceeds to show how Plato's theory creates more conceptual problems than it solves, in part because it cannot adequately explain how these ideas are related to the objects of which they are supposed to be models.

In contrast, art seems to have little to do with reasoning, logic, or even affirmation, and if it has to do with reasoning, then the reasoning is very different from that used in philosophy.¹⁵ Artists are not concerned with presenting explicit theses they affirm but rather with the creation of their own worlds.¹⁶ Few of the elements that go into the makeup of a philosophical product are present in art; there is no presentation of evidence or arguments; there is no evaluation of the evidence or the arguments; and there is no reasoning dialectic. Art does not engage in the kind of procedures common in philosophy. This becomes evident when one puts a philosophical treatise, say Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, next to a work of art, such as Estévez's *Self-fishing*. The gap appears enormous. It becomes even more clear when the two works are about the same topic, as happens with Estévez's *Irreversible Processes* and a particular question in Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*. Both deal with the issue of whether humans act freely, but they are worlds apart in their approach.

This gap can be explained in part because the end pursued by philosophers is generally the formulation of hypotheses they aim to demonstrate, even if the hypothesis is that there are no hypotheses. Philosophers defend some view or other or present criticisms of views with which they disagree. And even when a philosopher reaches a puzzling dead end, as happens frequently

in the Platonic Dialogues, this is regarded as an achievement, in that it reveals the inadequacy of a certain position assumed by some to be correct.

Artists, however, rarely seek to prove or disprove anything directly, and generally they formulate no explicit hypotheses which they defend or attack. This is why works of art, even those that have a narrative component, can be subjected to a variety of interpretations. Indeed, Adorno has claimed that art disappoints those who seek “conclusions,” for these require concepts and judgment, and art in his view lacks both.¹⁷ A work like Estévez’s *Forging People* surely tells us something, and what it tells us is supposedly true, but the message, if it can be called that, is not unambiguous or explicit. It is not like most claims found in philosophical treatises; both its character and the way it is presented are different. *Forging People* can be interpreted in diverse ways. The piece does not present us with a doctrine about how groups of people come to be. Rather, it becomes a means whereby an audience can consider various ways to approach this matter: people can be seen as products of divine creation, biology, social forces, or human imagination.

Artists create universes, with their own dialectics and rules, and although some art appears to express views, this is not a necessary condition of art as it seems to be of philosophy. Art may lead observers to formulate hypotheses and draw conclusions, but it is always risky to attribute such moves to the artists. This contrasts with what philosophers usually seek, and may be what Adorno is trying to put into words when he notes that “philosophy bears upon reality and its works,” whereas art “is more autarchically organized.”¹⁸

The divide between philosophy and art finds additional support in that the practitioners of art and philosophy generally have different talents, strengths, and weaknesses. Philosophers are trained to detect minor shifts in meaning and logic in sentences, arguments, and claims, but they might not realize the significance of different ways of rendering a leaf, of a brushstroke, of the use of a particular color, or the significance of rhyme, the sorts of things that are essential to art. Philosophers are used to dealing with concepts and their analysis, sometimes exclusively, whereas visual artists work primarily with materials at hand, such as paints, colors, stone, and pencils. Indeed, artists often have difficulty expressing themselves when asked to provide conceptual explanations of what they are trying to do with their art.¹⁹ Philosophers appear to have very different modes of operation, sensitivities, and visions than artists. Philosophy involves propositional understanding, whereas visual art is about perceptual grasp.²⁰ Even if both enterprises involve truth seeking, as many philosophers and artists have claimed, their approaches appear incompatible to many.²¹ And, for others, such as J. M. Bernstein, they are at least irreducible or untranslatable into each other.²²

The seeming opposition between art and philosophy stands in the way of accomplishing what is suggested in the subtitle of this book. If those who

claim that philosophy and art are incompatible are correct, then the philosophical interpretation of art is doomed from the start, in that the task requires establishing a relation between two enterprises that are opposed to each other or at least belong to two different realms. Of course, not every one agrees. If Danto is right and art “has passed over into a kind of consciousness of itself and become . . . its own philosophy,” then the philosophical interpretation of art should be possible.²³ But Danto’s move has been criticized by those who see it as a misunderstanding of art and the elimination of an important distinction between it and philosophy.²⁴ And, for our purposes, it would not work in any case. Obviously, if one of the opposites of an opposition is eliminated by turning it into the other, then the opposition vanishes. But to do this is not to explain how the opposites are related. It does not help to argue that the philosophical interpretation of art is possible because art is philosophy or philosophy is art. What we need is an account that maintains their integrity, seeing how they are different and in conflict, and yet explains how they can be related in the philosophical interpretation of art.²⁵

But are those who find an irreconcilable opposition between art and philosophy correct? The interpretations of Estévez’s works included in the first part of this book are presented as evidence that they are not. Still, the essays do not explain why. For that, as Plato would say, we need more than examples; we need an understanding of what a philosophical interpretation of art is and how it works.

Our task begins with two initial questions: What is art? What is a philosophical interpretation? Without answers to these questions, we would be hard-pressed to claim that we have understood all that is involved in the philosophical interpretation of art, or that we understand in what sense the essays on Estévez’s art given here can qualify as philosophical interpretations. But the answers to both questions are highly contested. The degree of disagreement concerning the first is evident in ordinary life from the fact that the same objects are regarded by some as important artworks and by others as mere rubbish. This is matched by the number of conflicting definitions of art among philosophers of art. And the views concerning philosophical interpretation are not less contested, in particular because both philosophy and interpretation are highly controversial notions. The hermeneutical literature is full of conflicting views about interpretation, whereas philosophers themselves disagree strongly about what is and what is not philosophy.

Here I cannot examine even a small number of the views that have been proposed about the notions of interpretation, art, or philosophy. Rather, I shall have to make do by proposing views of them that I have more extensively defended elsewhere and that hopefully will help readers think about this relationship and the essays in this volume. I begin with interpretation and then move to art and its philosophical interpretation. The reason is that

certain conceptions of art and its relation to interpretation and philosophy can muddle the discussion if we begin with art without first making clear some things about interpretation. The overall moral of the story is that the philosophical interpretation of art is not only possible, but indeed enlightening, apart from being fun, for both the philosopher and the artist. I plan to offer support for this first by presenting philosophical interpretations of the work of Carlos Estévez and second through conceptual analysis. Before I turn to this double task, however, let me say something about Estévez and his art.