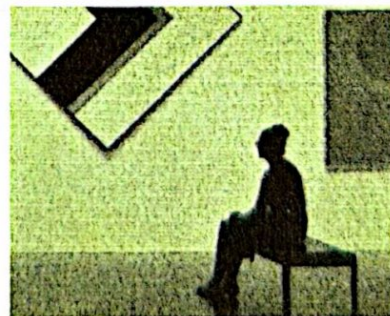
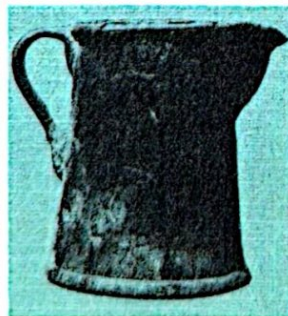
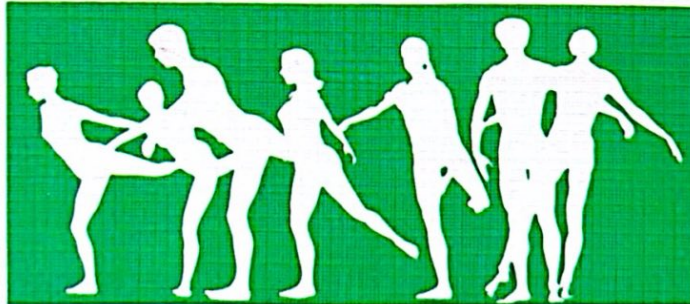


"...remarkably clear and interesting...
a fine introduction to some central problems
in the philosophy of art."

— MONROE C. BEARDSLEY

ART IN ACTION



NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF

Preface

IN AN essay composed some thirty years ago Dorothy Sayers remarked that

In such things as politics, finance, sociology, and so on, there really is a philosophy and a Christian tradition; we do know more or less what the Church has said and thought about them, how they are related to Christian dogma, and what they are supposed to *do* in a Christian country.

But oddly enough, we have no Christian aesthetic—no Christian philosophy of the Arts. The Church as a body has never made up her mind about the Arts, and it is hardly too much to say that she has never tried. She has, of course, from time to time puritanically denounced the Arts as irreligious and mischievous, or tried to exploit the Arts as a means to the teaching of religion and morals. . . . And there have, of course, been plenty of writers on aesthetics who happened to be Christians, but they seldom made any consistent attempt to relate their aesthetic to the central Christian dogmas.¹

The essay that follows represents an attempt on my part to relate my “aesthetic to the central Christian dogmas,” which I hold for true. Or better, it represents an attempt to articulate how I as a Christian see art and the aesthetic dimension of reality. For I find that my thoughts about art and the aesthetic do not arise independently of my Christian convictions. I do not find myself with two separate things in hand that must somehow be related. On the contrary, those Christian convictions contribute to the formation of those thoughts about the arts. Accordingly, this book is not an attempt to relate Christianity to the arts nor the arts to Christianity. It is the record of reflections on the arts by someone who stands within the Christian tradition and identifies himself with the Christian community.

The book is closely related to another book of mine which is shortly to be published, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford University Press). The latter book is addressed to philosophers and develops in much more intricate detail and with much more careful justification certain of the positions taken up here in Part One, and in Chapter III of Part Three, along with developing positions on issues not even broached here. On the other hand, the present book,

addressed to a much wider audience than philosophers, gives my deep-lying religious reasons for the approach I adopt in the philosophical book. The two works are thus an interlocking pair.

In recent years it has become the habit of those Christians writing about the arts who are not simply culture-avoiders or aesthetic conservatives to take for granted the basic lineaments of our contemporary Western way of thinking about the arts, to propose revisions here and there in that way of thinking, and then to urge that Christians get involved in the arts thus understood. Customarily this injunction is buttressed with a "theological interpretation" of art and implemented with a "theological criticism."

By contrast, I shall contend that there are serious defects in our contemporary Western way of thinking about the arts, so that *reconsideration* rather than theological *interpretation* is first of all required. At the foundation of the alternative which I propose is the thesis that works of art are instruments and objects of action—and then, of an enormous diversity of actions. Hence the title: *Art in Action*. What I propose is a *functional* approach to art.

My thanks are due the many students to whom I have taught aesthetics over the years for stimulating my thought, often in ways they did not realize, with their provocative questions and sturdy objections. And to the Institute for Advanced Christian Studies for their financial support which enabled me to take a semester's leave of absence to complete the writing of the book. My thanks also to the genuine community of Christian scholars which exists at Calvin College, and of which I am privileged to be a member, for countless acts of assistance and observations of insight; and to Edgar and Ervina Boevé, Phyllis Mouw, and Jon Pott, all of whom read the manuscript with perceptive care and offered helpful criticisms. Lastly, my thanks to the artists of the world for what they have composed, without which my own life would be radically impoverished. When I now listen to, or read, or look at, or otherwise participate in what they have made, I sometimes feel that these words of mine are but straw and that there is no other truly appropriate response to the great art of the world than to cease our chatter and give thanks to God our Creator—to whose glory all good art contributes, sometimes even, one must say with deep sadness, in spite of what the makers intended—for having granted to us his favored creatures that there should be art in our lives.

Grand Rapids, Michigan
June, 1979

PART ONE

Artistically Man Acts

W 1. ART IN ACTION

WE HAVE all heard it said that the proper approach to a work of art consists in abstracting the object from its context of action, isolating the work from its fabric of intention, and focussing one's attention on the object itself—discerning and revelling in its play of sounds or colors or textures or metaphors. We have all been told that to do otherwise is to commit the “intentional fallacy.” We all live in the fading glow of that movement which told us to treat the work of art *as a work of art*—to regard it for its own sake and not for the sake of some ulterior end, to treat it autonomously.

Art, we have been told, is useless. “The most evident characteristic of a *work of art* may be termed *uselessness* . . . ” said Paul Valery.¹ Naturally Valery knew that art is useful for many things—paintings for covering nail holes in one's living room wall, music for sedating factory workers. What he meant is that to put a work of art to some use is to fail to acknowledge and respect the reason for that thing's existence in our midst. What he meant is that to put it to some use is to fail to treat the work of art *as a work of art*.

In this essay, I want to argue, on the contrary, that works of art are objects and instruments of action. They are all inextricably embedded in the fabric of human intention. They are objects and instruments of action whereby we carry out our intentions with respect to the world, our fellows, ourselves, and our gods. Understanding art requires understanding art in man's life.

Of course the person who recommends that we focus all our attention on the work itself is not really recommending that we abstract the work *entirely* from the context of action. Rather he is recommending that we give preferential status to one action—that of *focussing* on the work. He is not recommending that we put the work of art to *no* use. He is recommending that we give preference to the use of serving as object of *contemplation*. That explains why the autonomist movement has provided us not only with analyses of works of art but also with theories of contemplation—disinterested contemplation, aesthetic contemplation, and the like.

Created by the people -
came out of their experiences
Spiritual or work for sale
Concrete experience

ARTISTICALLY MAN ACTS

The perspective of this essay is different. Serving as object of the action of contemplation is but one among other ways in which works of art enter, in fact and by intent, into the fabric of human action.

2. THE UNIVERSALITY OF ART

I well remember the museum director remarking to me that the American pioneers travelling westward across the prairies had no art, since they lacked leisure. My response was that in all likelihood they had work songs and voyage songs—music for which leisure was the last thing needed.

The truth is that in discussing the arts we are discussing something universal to mankind. We know of no people which has done without music and fiction and poetry and role-playing and sculpture and visual depiction. Possibly some have done without one or the other of these; none to our knowledge has done without all. Indeed—to single out just one of the arts—none to our knowledge has done without visual depiction. “There were,” says the anthropologist Paul S. Wingert, “no primitive peoples, however meager their cultural attainments, who offered no patronage to the artist.”² Another anthropologist, Raymond Firth, agrees:

It is commonly held that economic activity is a necessity, but that art is a luxury. Yet we can assert empirically the universality of art in man's social history. Paleolithic man ten thousand years or more ago had his statuettes and his cave-paintings, of which some still preserved for us are of such aesthetic mastery and dynamic skill that they evoke the admiration of modern artists. Even in the hardest natural environments, art has been produced. . . . It is easy, then, to refute the idea that at the primitive stages of man's existence the theme of subsistence dominated his life to the exclusion of the arts.³

3. THE PURPOSE OF ART

What then is art for? What purpose underlies this human universal?

One of my fundamental theses is that this question, so often posed, must be rejected rather than answered. The question assumes that there is such a thing as the purpose of art. That assumption is false. There is no purpose which art serves, nor any which it is intended to serve. Art plays and is meant to play an enormous diversity of roles in human life. Works of art are instruments by which we perform such diverse actions as praising our great men and expressing our grief, evoking emotion and communicating knowledge. Works of art are objects of such actions as contemplation for the sake of delight. Works of art are accompaniments for such actions as hoeing cotton and rocking infants. Works of art are background for such actions as eating meals and walking through airports.

Works of art equip us for action. And the range of actions for which they equip us is very nearly as broad as the range of human action itself. The purposes of art are the purposes of life. To envisage human existence without

art is not to envisage human existence. Art—so often thought of as a way of getting out of the world—is man's way of acting *in* the world. *Artistically man acts.*

Any aesthetic which neglects the embeddedness of art in action is bound either to distort the arts or to find them inscrutable. Likewise, any aesthetic which neglects the enormous *diversity* of actions in which art plays a role, in fact and by intent, is bound to yield distortion or inscrutability.

At this point someone might protest. What we have shown, he might say, is that human actions of a wide range cannot be understood without understanding the role of works of art in those actions. What we have not shown is the converse point: that works of art cannot be understood without understanding their role in action, and, more specifically, their role in a wide diversity of actions.

The whole of the essay which follows will serve to display the untenability of this objection. We shall see, for example, that the arts of the modern West cannot be understood without perceiving that they are mainly meant to give satisfaction when used as objects of contemplation.

But perhaps the point can be made more swiftly and persuasively by glancing at the phenomenon of pictorial representation. On the primary concept of a picture, a certain design is a picture of so-and-so only if the person who produced or presented it *pictured* so-and-so by so doing. When in the American Southwest we come across some incised pattern on a rock and wonder whether or not it is a picture, we are wondering whether someone performed the action of picturing something by incising this pattern. And when, further, we wonder whether it is a picture of a condor or of a horse, that is determined by reference to what its maker pictured with it. We may for years take it to be a picture of a horse. But if someone then presents evidence to show that its maker probably pictured a condor thereby, that establishes that it is probably a picture of a condor and not of a horse. Thus an object's being a picture of so-and-so is parasitic on the phenomenon of someone's performing the action of picturing so-and-so with that object.

It is true that we speak of "seeing pictures" in the clouds, or on damp walls. But in speaking thus we are using a secondary sense of "picture." One can see a picture of so-and-so in such-and-such without there being a picture that one sees.

Fundamental in any full-fledged attempt to understand works of arts will be what might be called a *role analysis* of those works—by which I mean an analysis of the *role* that those works play and are intended to play in human action.⁴

4. THE ARTS

By now the reader will be asking what I take the arts to be. So let me halt the progress of my argument to answer.

depicting
an object
either literal
or figurative

Suppose you were asked to list the major (fine) arts. What would appear on your list? I dare say that everyone would unhesitatingly cite music, poetry, drama, literary fiction, visual depiction, ballet and modern dance, film, and sculpture. None of us would have any doubt whatsoever about regarding each of these eight phenomena as an art, and as a *major* art.

Beyond those eight, some would hesitate. We might even fall into disagreements. Some of us would have no problem adding additional phenomena, such as architecture. But for each of those, others of us would pause. Some might even resist.

Someone who wished to promote unanimity might suggest that for these additional phenomena we ought to differentiate various species of the phenomenon from the phenomenon itself—distinguish, for example, architect-designed buildings from buildings in general. Perhaps by thus differentiating we could indeed expand our initial list. But still, those eight are what initially we would all regard as major arts.

Now look closely at those eight. Though we naturally group them together, they are in fact very diverse phenomena. Singing a song, depicting a horse, telling a story—those are very different things. The familiarity of our grouping of the arts, according to which these eight phenomena are paradigm examples and a number of other phenomena are more or less controversial borderline examples, conceals from us how remarkable the grouping is.

Not only is it remarkable. It is of relatively recent origin. In the long history of human use of the arts and reflection upon them, only modern man has found the grouping compelling. Paul Oskar Kristeller in his essay "The Modern System of the Arts"⁵ traces the development of the combination and shows that it was in the eighteenth century that writers first began to group together painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry. Until that time people would have felt, for example, that music has closer affinities with mathematics than it has with painting. Says Kristeller:

The basic notion that five "major arts" constitute an area all by themselves, clearly separated by common characteristics from the crafts, the sciences and other human activities, has been taken for granted by most writers on aesthetics from Kant to the present day. It is freely employed even by those critics of art and literature who profess not to believe in "aesthetics"; and it is accepted as a matter of course by the general public of amateurs who assign to "Art" with a capital A that ever narrowing area of modern life which is not occupied by science, religion, or practical pursuits.

. . . [T]his system of the five major arts, which underlies all modern aesthetics and is so familiar to us all, is of comparatively recent origin and did not assume definite shape before the eighteenth century, although it has many ingredients which go back to classical, medieval and Renaissance thought.⁶

You will notice that my own list of what we today would all regard as major arts differs a bit from Kristeller's list. It differs in that I have on my list the new phenomena of ballet and film. It also differs in that Kristeller has architecture

on his list, whereas I do not have it on mine. For I judge that you and I would have doubts that architecture is really an art. Also, I have fiction and drama on my list, whereas Kristeller, somewhat curiously, omits them from his. (Perhaps they are included under poetry.) What we agree on, however, is the grouping together of poetry, music, and visual depiction. And it is a striking fact that when we go back behind the eighteenth century we never find these three grouped together as having anything of importance in common. The emergence of this triple-membered core was the decisive step in the emergence of our modern grouping of the arts.

Contrary to what one might first expect, the emergence of our modern grouping has little to do with the birth of new phenomena. All but two of the phenomena that we would regard as paradigm arts were present in culture before the eighteenth century, and all the phenomena that pre-eighteenth-century thinkers listed as arts are present in ours. Furthermore, our word "art" and its synonyms in other languages were available to them. What was missing was just our modern *concept* of the arts. The gradual emergence of that concept seems to have resulted from the emergence of a new view as to the primary intended use for such things as music, visual depiction, and poetry. In turn, the emergence of that new view seems to have resulted from that use itself coming into prominence among the cultural elite of the eighteenth century.⁷

In Part Two of my discussion I will be in a position to *explain* our modern concept of *an art*. Meanwhile, I shall nevertheless use the concept on the assumption that the reader has an intuitive grasp of it. And I shall assume that among the major fine arts are to be found music, poetry, drama, literary fiction, visual depiction, ballet and modern dance, film, and sculpture.

5. THE ESSENTIAL PURPOSE OF ART.

We had arrived at the point of seeing that works of art, in fact and by intent, are used to perform an enormous diversity of actions. May it not be the case, though, that beneath the flux and diversity there is *one* action which is characteristic of art? May it not be that there is *one* action which is unique to, and pervasive within, the arts?

Certainly that is the unquestioned assumption of nearly all our modern theorists. Examples can be found almost at random. Here is what the Marxist theorist George Thomson says:

'Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art!' *Den lieb' ich, der Unmöglichen begehrt*. Why do poets crave for the impossible? Because that is the essential function of poetry, which it has inherited from magic. In the wild transport of the mimetic dance the hungry, frightened savages express their weakness in the face of nature by a hysterical act of extreme mental and physical intensity, in which they lose consciousness of the external world, the world as it really is, and plunge into the subconscious, the inner world of fantasy, the world as they long for it to

be. By a supreme effort of will they strive to impose illusion on reality. In this they fail, but the effort is not wasted. Thereby the psychical conflict between them and their environment is resolved. Equilibrium is restored. And so, when they return to reality, they are actually more fit to grapple with it than they were before.⁸

Though it is clear that Thomson regards "the essential function of poetry" as not wholly unique to poetry but as shared with primitive dance at least, yet Thomson is speaking directly here not about the arts in general but about poetry. And his claim is that poets "by a supreme effort of will . . . strive to impose illusion on reality."

But is it clear that the purpose of all poetry is to impose illusion on reality? Is it not rather that if we understand these hazy words so that they do indeed apply to all poetry, then we have understood them in such a way that they apply to vastly more than poetry, and vastly more than art? To philosophy as well, for example? Whereas if we understand them in such a way that they apply only to poetry, or only to art, then they do not apply to all poetry and all art?

In that respect these words of Thomson are paradigmatic. Over and over one comes across claims to the effect that such-and-such is "the essential function of art." "Art is mimesis." "Art is self-expression." "Art is significant form." All such formulae fall prey to the same dilemma. Either what is said to be characteristic of art is true of more than art. Or, if true only of art, it is not true of all art.

The universality of art corresponds only to a diversity and flux of purposes, not to some pervasive and unique purpose.

6. INTENDED PUBLIC USE OF ART

Not only do multiple purposes underlie the production and use of art, with none constant and unique amidst the flux and diversity. So too, more narrowly, the *public uses* intended by artist or distributor are multiple and various, with none constant and unique.

Consider, as an interesting example, the masks of the Papuan Gulf people. We go to Chicago or to London, walk into an art or ethnological museum, and there find them hanging in climate-controlled cases—these from the Papuan Gulf next to some from the Cameroons, those from Alaska next to some from the Benin tribe. We go from one to the other, admiring their aesthetic qualities, finding ourselves powerfully moved. Then we proceed to another room, there to contemplate a Rembrandt or a display of sarcophagi. The use to which we put those masks is the use of serving as objects of the action of aesthetic contemplation. And that is clearly the public use *intended* by the museum directors who present them to us.

How different was the intended public use of those masks among their originators, the people who lived along the Papuan Gulf in South New Guinea. Because that use is profoundly strange and foreign to us, it will be

worth taking a bit of time to scrutinize it. Let me follow the description given by Paul S. Wingert in his book *Primitive Art*.⁹

"If crops had been meager, or an unusual number of persons had died over a span of time, the elders of a clan, realizing that the security and survival of their group were threatened, would decide that a ceremony honoring beneficent, traditional, supernatural beings must be held in order to avert total disaster. Each clan had as its special benefactors a certain number of these supernatural spirits and possessed the right to represent them by constructing and painting tall, oval-shaped masks.

". . . a large house was erected with a prescribed amount of wood for the heavy log framework and a heavy thatch covering for the roof. In this house, each clan would make its own masks, keeping them out of sight of the women and children." The particular shape and decoration of the masks were chosen so that each could function in representing a distinct spirit. "But all were made in the same way and were decorated with a shared vocabulary of geometric symbols. . . . The making of the masks was a cooperative clan endeavor under the direction of an elder who dictated the designs from memory. Because of the many interdicts and restraints associated with the mask-making, plus the necessity to grow and accumulate the quantities of food required for the feasts which accompanied the ceremony, preparations frequently lasted as long as five years.

"When everything was finally ready, the masks were ritually indoctrinated; and on the following day, at sunup, the ceremony began. From the great, high door of the special house where they had been secretly made, each mask, worn by a clan member, emerged individually to take its proper place in the ritual proceedings. For several days, the clan members walked around the villages and along the shore grouped around one or another of their own masks, singing and rejoicing in their presence." Thus at the heart of the whole mask enterprise was a particular combination of uses: Each was worn by one clan member in the ritual proceedings, and each was honored by the other clan members by means of singing and dancing. The masks represented spirits. But the primitive artist did not represent just because he was fond of representing. He did so for the purpose of the mask's being worn and honored in the ritual. Honoring the mask was in turn connected with paying homage to the god. For it was the belief of the Papuan people that the mask, when worn by the clan member, served to bring about the presence of the represented spirit. The mask went proxy for the spirit. And so, as one might expect, the mask when worn and honored throughout the days of ritual had the effect of producing "almost hysterically charged excitement and exuberance."

"During these few days other ceremonies were held for the initiation of the young into adult society, at which time still other spirits, represented by conical masks of similar construction, were in attendance. At the end of the ceremonial period, all of the great masks re-entered the special house for the last time and continued through to a sacred court behind it, where they were

ritually thanked for their presence and were then destroyed by fire."

The ultimate purpose behind the use of masks by the Papuan Gulf people was to alleviate the threat of disease and starvation. For it was their belief that by paying homage to the supernatural spirit "in the mask" they would induce the spirit to work on their behalf. The mask functioned, so they believed, to secure the favor of the spirit.

In short, their masks entered deeply and richly into the lives of the Papuan Gulf people. But at the center of it all was a certain intended public use: The mask was to be *honored*, and thereby the god-in-the-mask was to be paid homage.

Those very same masks now have among us an intended public use as well. That use is of course not the action of honoring. It is the action of *aesthetic contemplation*.

7. OUR BLINDNESS

Seldom do we have before our mind's eye the whole broad sweep of the purposes of art. And in particular, seldom do we acknowledge that the intended public uses for art are diverse and multiple, with none constant. To the contrary, all of us, theorists and non-theorists alike, assume that beneath the flux and diversity of purpose there is just one intended public use. Only such diversity of purpose is acknowledged as is compatible with that supposed singleness of intended public use.

For the art of music, we assume that the public use intended is just that of listening. Music is for listening to. For the art of painting, just that of looking. Painting is for looking at. For poetry, only that of reading or listening. Poetry is for reading or listening to. No matter what the art, in each case the action that you and I tend to regard as intended is a species of what I shall call *perceptual contemplation*. We differ in our views as to why artists compose works for that intended use, or as to what of benefit is gained by submitting works of art to that use. But we share the assumption that works of art are composed and presented to the public for their perceptual contemplation. Virtually every statement concerning the purposes of the arts which comes from the hands of our aestheticians, our art theorists, our critics, makes this assumption. Only among anthropologists is there significant resistance to the consensus.

Yet the assumption is surely false. The masks of the Papuan Gulf people were not intended for looking at but to be worn and honored. The songs and dances of primitive people were not meant to be contemplated but to be performed by all so as to make crops grow or rains fall. The small clay figurines made by ancient Mexicans and now being unearthed from burial sites were not intended for looking at but to accompany the dead in their afterlife. And if the standard view concerning the paintings in the Lascaux caves is correct, they too were not intended for looking at but, in magical fashion, to help achieve success in the hunt.

But if it is indeed true that the intended public uses of works of art cover so broad a range as that, plus many others besides, why then is our *view* of the intended public uses so constricted? Why is our vision so confined? Could it be that most of us don't know enough about other societies to realize that in them the intended public uses of works of art comprise vastly more than perceptual contemplation? Surely not. We all know, at least in a general way, that in societies other than our own, works of art have a broad range of intended public uses. Then could it be that when you and I think about the intended public uses of works of art it is exclusively our own society that we have in mind? No, that cannot be the explanation either. After all, there are hymns in our society. But hymns are not intended to be listened to but rather to be sung by an entire cultic gathering in order to give praise to its god. And in our society are bits of poetry children recite when playing games. But obviously these are not meant for listening to but rather to serve one or another role in playing the game. Then too, for the most part the music composed for our contemporary films is not intended to be listened to but to function as auditory background. All this we all know. The world is filled with works of art never intended for perceptual contemplation.

Why then do we all so regularly take for granted that works of art *are* intended for contemplation? What induces us to ignore the obvious?

The suggestion I wish to develop is that our thought on these matters has in large measure been determined by the social realities of the role of art in a certain segment of our society. You and I are participants in what I shall call our society's *institution of high art*. Our participation in this situation has cast a spell over us. In large measure we think as we do about the arts because we consider only the role of the arts in this institution, though in the back of our minds we know that they have other roles in life as well.

It is my goal in this book to dig beneath the particulars of how art functions in our society, and beneath the particulars of how art functions in other societies, down to what is universal in art. The situation of most of us in our society, however, is that we persistently mistake the particular for the universal. Accordingly, before we can even begin the positive task of constructing a perspective which will hold for the arts universally we must engage in critique, in unmasking, for the sake of liberation. We must break the spell which our participation in the institution of high art has cast over us. We must look the spellbinder in the face, taking note of some of her salient but idiosyncratic features, casting a glance aside every now and then to assure ourselves that the features we have noted are indeed, in spite of all their beckoning familiarity, not universal but idiosyncratic.

A word of explanation: By listening, I of course don't mean simply *hearing*. Those who sing the hymn hear what they are singing though they do not listen to it. And by looking at, I do not mean merely *noticing*. Posters are of course to be noticed even though they are not meant to be looked at. And so forth. To listen to something, to look at something, to read something, is to have it occupy the focus of our perceptual attention. It is to *attend* to it. It is to

set it out from its penumbral background and to *concentrate* on it itself. When I say that works of art are not in general intended for contemplation, neither in our own society nor any other, I mean that they are not in general intended to be the focus of our perceptual attention. Naturally there are gradations. Listening shades into hearing, looking into noticing.

8. THE STRUCTURE OF ART IN ACTION

Before we turn to an analysis of our institution of high art, we must, however, tend to a certain preliminary matter which is a bit technical but important to the argument. Not only do works of art enter into a wide variety of human action. They enter into those actions in a variety of structurally different ways. It will be important for our subsequent purposes to have some awareness of this latter variety. In developing the structure of art in action I shall at first avoid taking examples from the field of art. For the structure in question is a structure that works of art share with cultural artifacts generally.

Suppose I assert in your presence that all philosophy is abstract. Suppose I do so by uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract." And suppose that thereupon you come to believe that all philosophy is abstract. In this simple situation I will have performed three distinct actions: that of uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract," that of asserting that all philosophy is abstract, and that of informing you that all philosophy is abstract.

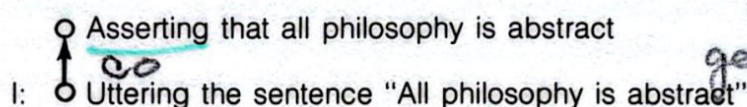
Most of us today are parsimonious in nature, not indeed about our possessions but certainly in our ontology. We are suspicious of the claim that in this simple situation there really are these three distinct actions performed. But if the existence of actions is acknowledged at all, that conclusion is irresistible. This can be seen as follows.

An action *A* is distinct from an action *B* if it is possible for someone to perform *A* and not *B*, or *B* and not *A*. For if *A* was the very same action as *B*, then if one performed *A* one would perforce have performed *B*, and if one performed *B* one would perforce have performed *A*. Consider then the actions before us. I could have performed the action of asserting that all philosophy is abstract without performing the action of uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract." For I might have made that very same assertion with some other English words, or in a different language. Conversely, I might have performed the action of uttering those English words without performing the action of making that assertion. I might have uttered the words for the sake of their sound, let us say. And quite obviously I might have performed both of these actions without having had any effect whatsoever on your beliefs, and so without performing the action of informing you that all philosophy is abstract. So we are indeed dealing with three distinct actions in the simple case before us.

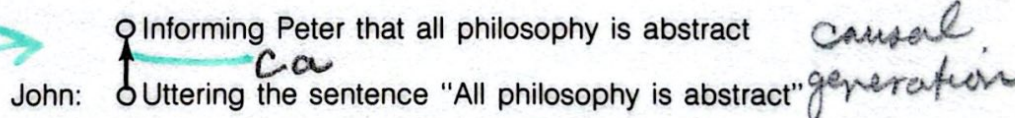
But though distinct, these three actions are related in a most intimate way

in the situation envisioned. For it is by performing the action of uttering those words that I perform the action of making that assertion. And likewise it is by performing the action of uttering those words that I perform the action of informing you of that. Now when a person on a certain occasion performs one action by performing another, let us say that he has on that occasion generated the one action by performing the other. In our thought-example we have then two specimens of action-generation. By performing the action of uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract," I generated the action of asserting that all philosophy is abstract. And secondly, by performing the action of uttering that English sentence, I generated the action of informing you that all philosophy is abstract.

It may prove helpful to have a diagrammatic way of displaying the fact that a person on a certain occasion generates one action by performing another. To show that I generated the action of asserting that all philosophy is abstract by performing the action of uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract," we can use this diagram:



And similarly, to show diagrammatically that John informed Pete that all philosophy is abstract by uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract," we can use this diagram:



Our two specimens of action-generation, asserting by uttering and informing by uttering, differ in a significant way which we must now note. Informing you of something is an action that occurs only if my performance of the generating action causes a certain effect in you. If my uttering had had no effect on you, I would not have informed you. Specifically, I inform you that all philosophy is abstract only if I do something which causes the event of your being informed that all philosophy is abstract. In the case before us, it was my uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract" that caused you to be informed that all philosophy is abstract. Let us call action-generation which thus involves causality causal generation.¹⁰

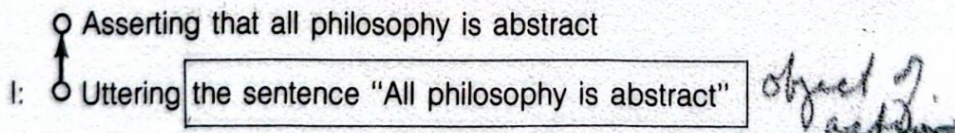
Our other specimen of action-generation is different. My asserting that all philosophy is abstract does not consist in my bringing about some event which is caused by my performance of the generating action, this latter being the action of uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract." Rather, my performing the action of uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract" counts as my asserting that all philosophy is abstract. The connection here does not come about by virtue of the causal texture of nature but by virtue of my performance of the one action's counting as my

performance of the other.¹¹ We can easily display this difference on our diagrams by placing "ca" opposite the arrowed line for causal generation and "co" opposite that for what we may call count-generation.

The application to art is this: By performing one and another action with or on his work of art, the artist generates a variety of other, distinct, actions. Some of those generated actions are count-generated, some are causally generated. By shaping and designing the masks as he did, the Papuan Gulf artist count-generated the action of representing one of the clan's guardian spirits. By wearing the mask and walking among his clan members, he causally generated the action of producing almost hysterical excitement. Thus works of art are what we might call *instruments* in the performance of generated actions; alternatively expressed, they *function in* our performance of generated actions.

But even more basic than the phenomenon of works of art being *instruments* of action is the phenomenon of works of art being *objects* of action. Works of art are objects on which we perform actions. They are things to which we do things. By using works of art as *objects* of action we generate other actions, for which those works are then the *instruments*. When I generate the action of informing you that all philosophy is abstract by uttering the sentence "All philosophy is abstract," the sentence "All philosophy is abstract" is the *object* of the action of uttering and *instrument* of the action of informing you.

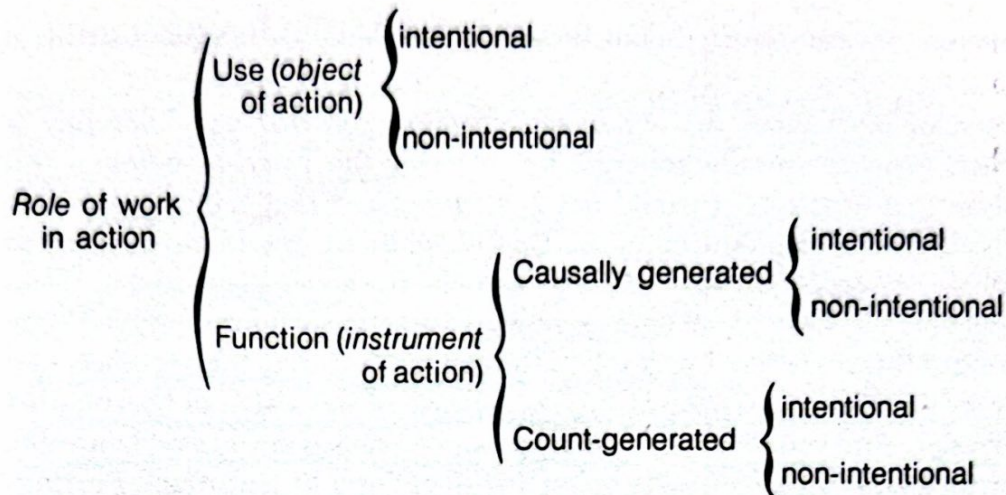
Look once against at our first diagram. To show that the sentence is object of the action of uttering, as when I perform the generating action of uttering the sentence "All philosophy is abstract," we can put a rectangle around the expression which stands for the *object* of the action, thus:



This now shows that the sentence is the object of the action of uttering. Likewise it shows that that sentence is an instrument for, or functions in, my performance of the generated action of asserting that all philosophy is abstract. For the sake of having a convenient terminology, let us say that an entity is *used* to perform whatever action it is an *object* for.

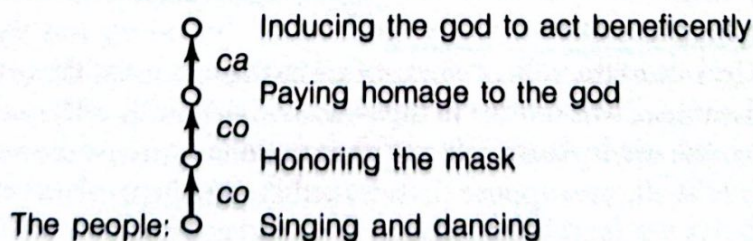
Perhaps what should be added is the rather obvious point that both generating actions and generated actions may be performed either intentionally or non-intentionally. What should also be added is the related point that often one action is performed for the *purpose* of performing another.

What we have then is this:



I have concentrated so far on the actions of the speaker—and, correspondingly, on the actions of the artist. But the structure uncovered also shows up when we look at the role of works of art in the actions of the public. Works of art serve as objects of certain actions on the part of the public; they are things on which the public performs various actions. Among the Papuan Gulf people, for example, the masks were honored by the cult members; that was one of the uses to which they were put, one of the actions performed on them, one of the actions for which the work was object. But the people believed that by submitting the mask to the action of honoring they would in turn count-generate the action of paying homage to the god, since they believed that the mask went proxy for the god. And they believed that by paying homage to the god they in turn would induce the god to act beneficently toward them. Thus they believed that the work of art was instrument for (i.e., functioned in) the performance of those two generated actions of paying homage to the god and of inducing him to act beneficently toward them.

If in turn it be asked how they generated the action of honoring the mask, the answer is that they did it by singing certain words and performing certain dances. On the (no doubt false) assumption that they did in fact honor a god and induce him to act beneficently towards them, the entire structure can be displayed as follows:



The role of a work of art in the actions of the artist is to be distinguished from the role of that work of art in the actions of the public. That is important to keep in mind, though, as we have just seen, the *structure* of those roles is the same. But while these roles are distinct, characteristically they are closely

connected. We can return to our thought-example to see in what way this is true.

Consider once more the action of informing you that all philosophy is abstract, which I causally generate by uttering the English sentence "All philosophy is abstract." I would not have generated that action unless that occurrence which I produced of the English sentence would have served as object of a certain action on *your* part—namely, the action of hearing it. If you had not heard it, I would not have generated the action of informing you by my uttering of this sentence. *I performed the action of uttering the sentence, and so I produced an occurrence of it. You performed the action of hearing that occurrence. And your hearing of what I produced causes in you a certain belief which formerly you lacked—the belief that all philosophy is abstract. Further, I may have uttered the English sentence I did for the purpose of causing that belief in you. If so, then my purpose in producing it presupposes my wanting you to perform, on that occurrence of the sentence which I produce, the action of hearing it. Thus your hearing was my intended public use, presupposed by my wish to inform you.*

So it also goes in art. The Papuan Gulf artist produced his work so as to induce the clan's spirit to act beneficently. That was his ultimate purpose. But in the Papuan scheme of things, achieving that purpose presupposed the mask's being put to the public use of being honored by the clan members. So that was the artist's intended public use for his work of art. Similarly, Rembrandt causally generated, and perhaps intended to generate, the action of giving people aesthetic delight by creating and presenting to the public his *St. Paul*. But his generation of this action presupposes that people use his painting as object of the action of aesthetic contemplation. Accordingly, if Rembrandt intended that his painting function in giving people aesthetic delight, then the intended public use that he had in mind was that of people using the painting as object of aesthetic contemplation.

Underlying the artist's creative activity will characteristically be a certain intended public use. And he gives his work the properties he does in part because he makes it for that use. If he had made it for a different public use, he would have made it different. Of course, he fully expects that the public will also use his work in ways he never intended.

So in fact and by intent the role of works of art in the actions of the artist is interlocked with the role of works of art in the actions of the public. The actions of the artist in which the work plays a role are often actions which, if they are to be performed by him at all, presuppose that the public use the work in certain ways. And often that is not merely how things do in fact go. It is how the artist intends that they shall go. The artist intends a public use. *The Romantic notion that the artist simply pours his soul into his work with no thought of any public use for that work is wildly false to the realities of art.*

9. WORKS OF ART

Earlier I cited what I take to be the arts—the major fine arts, that is. Before I turn to an analysis of our institution of high art, a word must also be said concerning what I take *works of art* to be.

Dense thickets of controversy surround the question of how “work of art” is properly to be defined. The truth of the matter, it seems to me, is that our English phrase “work of art” is associated with a number of distinct concepts; and most of the controversies surrounding the definition of the phrase are rooted in the fact that one writer has one of the associated concepts in mind and another, another. Let me distinguish some of these diverse concepts.

Every phenomenon that any of us would regard as a fine art is a phenomenon which manifests itself in the form of particular products. For an art is an art of *making*. The art of music manifests itself in performances and in entities susceptible of performance; the art of visual depiction, in paintings; etc. And one concept of a work of (fine) art is just that of a *product of one of the (fine) arts*.

To see another way of conceiving of work of art, put the concept of the arts out of mind for a moment and notice that such things as paintings, but also such things as barns and trees, have many different *dimensions*. They have an economic dimension, for they enter in various ways into the economic affairs of men. They have a moral dimension, for they enter in various ways into the moral dimension of human life. They have a psychic dimension: we feel various emotions toward them. And they enter into the aesthetic dimension: they have aesthetic qualities.

Now the way in which a painting or barn enters into the economic dimension may be good. Likewise the way it enters into the moral dimension may be good; the painting may in many people produce effects which are morally desirable. So too, a barn or painting may be aesthetically good. Having noticed this, we now have the material to formulate a second concept of work of art: A work of (fine) art is an entity which is good in the aesthetic dimension. Such a definition, including as it does a reference to goodness, may be called a “normative” definition.

As this definition stands, it applies not only to human artifacts but also to things not produced by human endeavor: mountains, sunsets, eucalyptus seed pods, bird songs, rock strata. For these may all be aesthetically good. Seeing this, yet another concept of work of art comes at once to mind, narrower but closely related: A work of (fine) art is a human artifact which is good in the aesthetic dimension.

None of these ways of conceiving work of art refers at all to human intention. But often the concept used in discussion on the arts does incorporate such reference. Let us say that aesthetic contemplation is contemplation undertaken for the sake of the satisfaction to be gotten in the

contemplation, provided the satisfaction is grounded in the aesthetic qualities of the object. Here then is a concept which combines the idea of the aesthetic dimension with the idea of human intention: A work of (fine) art is *an entity made or presented in order to serve as object of aesthetic contemplation*.

In these various definitions, four different ideas enter: the idea of a product of one of the fine arts; the idea of aesthetic goodness; the idea of a human artifact; and the idea of producing something with the intent of its serving as object of aesthetic contemplation. Obviously these four ideas can be combined in yet other ways to yield concepts in addition to the four I have offered. And probably some of these additional concepts can also be found in writings on the arts. One might combine the first and the second to give this concept: A work of (fine) art is *an aesthetically good product of one of the (fine) arts*. Or one might combine the first and the fourth: A work of (fine) art is *a product of one of the (fine) arts intended for aesthetic contemplation*. Perhaps also there are concepts associated with the phrase "work of art" which use some idea beyond the four I have singled out.

Given this array of interconnected concepts, the question "Which definition is correct?" is ill-conceived. For, to say it once more, the English phrase "work of art" is associated with all these different concepts I have articulated. One can find all four of those definitions in use in discussions on art. Accordingly, when setting out on a discussion about art, one must always ask oneself, "Which of the concepts associated with the phrase 'work of art' shall I make use of in the particular discourse ahead of me?" In each case the answer to that question must be arrived at by considering the points to be made in the discourse. To make one sort of point it's best to use one of the concepts. To make another, another.

For the purposes of my discussion in this essay it will prove best to use the phrase "work of art" in the first sense, so that it expresses the concept of *a product of one of the (fine) arts*. Thus I shall use the phrase in a sense which is both *non-normative* and *non-intentional*.¹² In that lies the utility of using it thus. Since it is *non-normative*, I can speak of *aesthetically poor works of art*, whereas that would be impossible on the second and third definitions that I framed. And since it is *non-intentional*, I can speak of *liturgical art*. That would be impossible on the fourth definition, since liturgical art is, in the main, not produced with the intent that it shall serve as object of aesthetic contemplation.