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Epistemological Identities of Art

In book 3 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates establishes distinctions between beauty and truth. It would seem that one major classification of art could be viewed as a synthesis of these two important human values. "There are many beautiful things, but not a [beauty] itself or a [pure] form of beauty itself... is there one of these many beautiful things that won't also appear ugly?" (Plato 144). The synthesis occurring in this class of art is between the perception of the *sensa* in a work and the concepts that relate to human truth, a road down which each participant has traveled and is led through participation with these works. Michelangelo's "slaves" are perfect examples of beautifully rendered figures, horribly encapsulated and trapped within their blocks of stone. It should be argued that regardless of the reasons the pope's commission was not carried out, the truth uncovered at this stage of the artistic process was more directly revealed than in the intended product of "completed" sculptures. Beauty also exists as a unique truth for each individual at each moment. This classification of art seeks metaphysical truth, and thus, its artists are also philosophers.

Another classification of art would seem to apply to various works of increasing number that draw increasing attention—for example, the painting of the virgin mother, Mary in the Brooklyn Museum of Art's infamous 2000 exhibit. This is what a contemporary philosopher, Habermas, terms communicative action. The work maintains the motive of communication that is a component of the first class of art, but rather than being concerned with what is, its concerns lie between what is and what is not, Socrates' definition of conjecture. In Habermas' terms, it is apparent that this classification of art would also necessarily embrace diplomacy and brave political decisions as performance art. Assuming that the human spirit is indomitable and undefeatable, this art leads individuals and the masses to draw logical conclusions about human rights, including the rights to free speech, religion, and liberty over one's physical and incorporeal possessions. For the artist attempting to actively communicate into the experience of a perceiver, "The importance of that experience is not what man learns from it, but in that he experiences it" (Rand 38). Eddie Adams' infamous Vietnam photo agrees with this categorization.

Finally, there would seem to be a third class of artwork that implicitly signifies communication between artist and participants, with no reference to itself (or truth to itself). This classification in part is made up of the artwork that is produced by artists for profit as their primary interest. The reason this is possible today is that investors, more than metaphysically enthused patrons, subsidize the arts and various artists in particular. The works produced for this investment trade are handy crafts, but also as signifiers of value, they remain art in the strictest sense.

"...[A] man has observed the moods and pleasures of the assembled many and multifarious concerning painting, music, or even politics, and then considers it wisdom? If a man consorts with the many and makes them his masters more than is necessary by

displaying his poetry or other works to them, or his service to the city, then the [excessive force of the crowd] will force him to do whatever they approve. Have you ever heard such a man give an argument for the true goodness and beauty of this that wasn't utterly contemptible?" (Plato 156)

Art for the masses (as opposed to art foremost from the artist) is its own truth. Unfortunately, the reality of these works is not even achieved if successfully purchased and hoarded by dealers and collectors. The fortunate artwork that is executed and achieves the truth inherent to this artistic class is the state of affairs in everyday politics and bureaucracy at all levels. This is the status quo that defines our human planet. As a direct representation of reality with no transformation or integration of perception and cognition, this form of truth is the primary constituent of what every person experiences every day of their lives. It is this status quo upon which the metaphysical and communicative classes of art act as they continually strive to transform—and in many cases, directly improve—that reality.

Only the last class of art, untransformed reality in both executed and unachieving forms, can be consumed. The metaphysical and communicative classes of art build on this and as such, their message is a memorable and insightful transformation of the base material reality. As such, these works cannot ever be destroyed, but remain accessible to the human spirit as long as our collective memory persists.

Works Cited

Plato. The Republic. Ed. Raymond Larson. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1979.

Rand, Ayn. The Romantic Manifesto. 2nd ed. New York: Penguin/Signet, 1975.