

The Role of Art in Dynamic Humanism

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[This essay appears as a section in Dynamic Humanism (2007) where it is part of the larger argument for the importance of human intuitive competence at the individual, social and cultural levels.]

In most non-complex cultures, art and religion are fused with true art – not secular art or entertainment – being the graphic, plastic, performing, and verbal expression in metaphorical terms of intuitive awareness. As complex society emerges, symbolic expression or art is usually overtaken by the literal dogma of religiosity in what becomes institutionalized religion. What began as metaphor is taken literally and believed in as referencing absolute truth on the nature and meaning of existence. In this context, art has become fixed as truth, external to the individual and no longer directly or fluidly connected to individual intuitive awareness. Art has been captured by literal belief. When this happens, art must separate from religion to protect the integrity of symbolic expression as the direct metaphorical outlet for intuitive awareness. The problem is that in the situation of religiosity, such liberated art is heretical to religion and is usually banned on pain of death and destroyed when discovered. Art either conforms to dogma or is suppressed and forced underground.

As complex society develops further and secular humanism emerges, free artistic expression reappears, but often with minimal understanding of its connection to the intuitive or the spiritual. For a time there may be a loose appreciation of an undefined “spiritual” basis in art, but for the most part art is seen as emanating from the psychology of the individual or the sociology or culture of the group as filtered through the emotions of the artist. In this secular world of art, the intuitive source is often hidden in an undefined and mysterious zone referred to as “creativity.” Conceptually unhinged from the pragmatic world of everyday life, art – like religion itself – is peripheralized and associated with non-serious, leisure, entertainment, and playtime activities. Some art becomes truly secular in this context, losing virtually all underlying intuitive or spiritual reference. It may become mostly emotional, psychological and sociological in its reference and commercial in its motives. It can even masquerade under a mostly intellectual or elitist banner. At its worst, art devolves into vacuous entertainment – titillating, graphic, sensational, and/or sentimental with only the most superficial and often gratuitous message. In this situation, artists themselves may struggle to rediscover the roots of their art in intuitive awareness.

In Dynamic Humanism, art is fully reintegrated into life. Art's intuitive base of reference is fully recognized and the artist is encouraged to develop his or her intuitive capabilities so as to express in whatever metaphorical mode he or she chooses the deepest awareness possible. At the same time, art is understood as requiring technical capability that is intellectually based and as having levels of reference and meaning that can be emotive, psychological and sociological, even intellectual. Art can be all or any of these things, but to be great art, or ART, its expression must emanate from the intuitive and its source must be spiritual. The key function of ART is to symbolically express intuitive awareness in the world of the concrete at the most mature level of which the artist is capable. And it is committed to maintaining its fluid relationship to intuitive understanding and to rejecting the forces of both commercialization and intellectualization – represented by secular forces, and literalization and dogmatic incorporation – represented by the forces of religiosity.

Beyond its essential reference in intuitive awareness, art in Dynamic Humanism is seen as expressing dynamic meaning or understanding itself with the artist bringing to the audience his or her metaphorical vision of what it means to participate in the human awareness dynamic, to deal with the dynamic tension between the material and spiritual worlds, between the intellectual and intuitive points of view. Metaphor itself – the basis of all art – is the communicative tool in this dynamic, the expression in the concrete world of an awareness in the realm of the immaterial or spiritual. Artistic metaphor is the expressive bridge between the intuitive and the intellectual, the material and immaterial, the physical and the spiritual. Metaphor is a key dynamic element in communicating to others the consequence of the search for meaning in Dynamic Humanism.

In art, metaphor exists at two levels: form and content. Metaphor at the level of form is the “as if” condition that applies to image, story, drama, etc. standing for real life. This is the metaphor upon which the “willing suspension of disbelief” rests. We accept the representative form as if what it contains is real. The drama on stage or the characters and action described in narrative or graphically represented are accepted as if real – for the moment. On the other hand, content metaphor in art exists within the frame of formal metaphor, in a sense metaphor within metaphor. When the lion represents the king in a fable, a butterfly stands for the soul in a batik print, the Bible declares Peter the rock upon which the church is built, or a character transforms from a human to a serpent in a modern special effects film, metaphor at the level of content occurs. In each case, one thing is declared to be another thing, highlighting the shared features of the two and insisting on the connection between two otherwise

disparate entities [in the physical or material world]. Metaphor insists on a shared identity across discrete categories of the objective world, and in so doing, it suggests the unification awareness of intuitive and spiritual understanding. A simple and base metaphor is to declare, “Louis is a dog.” The grandest of metaphors is to announce, “Louis is God,” or “Louis is the Universe, and the Universe is Louis,” or to declare that the part is the whole and that the whole is the part. This is to state the essential understanding of intuitive awareness, the unified identify [oneness] of all things. Every metaphor carries us in the direction of this unification awareness, and art is the primary domain of metaphorical expression – in both form and content. This is why art plays such a key role in Dynamic Humanism – it is a primary communicative tool in the intuitive – intellectual dynamic [or the secular and spiritual, material and the immaterial dynamic].

Written language has been developed as a sophisticated tool to pass information and serve the intellect and science. But written language, as a linear expression, struggles to carry the holistic message of the intuitive. Currently art, through metaphor, is our most effective vehicle to communicate intuitive awareness in the material domain. We can hope that one day we will develop a vehicle appropriate to the direct communication of the intuitive. It seems most likely that this vehicle will operate through the feature of connection and shared identity that is inherent to the intuitive, and that no intermediate means of expression [vehicle] will be necessary. Awareness will be shared directly between and among minds. The presence of telepathy and clairvoyance among psychic phenomena suggests this possibility, should we put as much effort into developing these intuitive capabilities as we have in developing the aural language of communication and the written language of science and the intellect. Even with such a well-developed intuitive channel, art will remain vital in bringing intuitive awareness to expression metaphorically in the concrete, material world.

Art can, of course, be more or less interactive, asking more or less involvement by the audience in realizing the metaphoric message. Some artists only pose a question in metaphoric terms and leave it to the audience to generate the answer [abstract art]. Other artists pose the question and offer the outline of an answer leaving the audience to fill in the details of the message [impressionistic art]. Still other artists deliver question and answer in detail leaving it to the audience to receive their fully formed metaphorical message and respond [representational and photographic art]. Dynamic Humanism allows for all of these options recognizing that different artistic offerings are appropriate in different situations and for different audiences. Art can only be judged by 1) whether it readily communicates its intent to its target audience through the

creative use of metaphor in the expressive form the artist chooses, 2) whether it illuminates a more or less critical issue in awareness, and 3) whether it stimulates appropriate and productive reflection, understanding, and feeling regarding this issue.

Art is an integral part of the human process of searching for meaning in existence; it is not a static product to be collected for its economic value or admired for its difficulty [technical virtuosity], its production by a celebrated artist, its superficial features, its location in art history, or its technique. If an artistic offering does not contribute in some meaningful way to the fundamental search for meaning in life, it is not ART. It may excite or provoke various feelings and emotions, but if it does not participate in this search, first at the socio-psychological level and then at the spiritual level, it is entertainment, not art. In this regard, all art must be entertaining [engaging], but not all entertainment is art. Pure entertainment is to art what celebrity is to fame, and among the famous, there is a great range of significance. The same is true for art. Traditional art and art that has remained vital through time most likely is ART of considerable significance. Art that transcends time and cultures is the greatest ART, touching on the deepest human issues in the most profound way to the widest audience. ART, writ LARGE, emanates primarily from intuitive awareness, is technically executed superbly in the formal metaphor chosen, addresses essential socio-spiritual issues in an elegant and simple manner, and through appropriate content metaphors offers or provokes keen insight matched with fitting emotion on this issue.