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A Petition to be Freed from One's Identity

In Katarina Square in the Old Town in Zagreb there was once a gallery of modern art called Galerija suvremene umjetnosti. The country it was in no longer exists, but the gallery is still fully active. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies a series of symposia were held there under the title of *Tendencije*. The sixth symposium of this type was held on October 13th and 14th, 1978. A number of younger artists from Zagreb, Beograd, Milan, Paris, New York and elsewhere were invited to *t-6*. It was a meeting of socially-critical, committed artists: Radomir Damnjanovic; Zoran Popovic; Tomislav Gotovac, Hans Haacke and others. They had all reacted strongly against the education offered by the academies at that time. None of them worked in oils or acrylics. They favoured monochrome photography, preferably with an amateur look, and also videotape and film, and preferred to work with suites of images and compositions of words and pictures.

The criticism was directed not least at the commercialisation of art. One of the most striking exhibits was a work by Boris Bučan. Its title was SWISSART, with these eight letters in the same style and shade of red as the familiar Swissair logo of the time. Among the works Damnjanovic exhibited was a videotape

with the title *Marx-, Hegel- und Bibelstudien im Zündholzlicht*. A woman and a man at a table – three books – a pile of matches – the woman lights a match – she reads some random words from the Bible in German – lights another match and manages to read a few more words before it is dark again – the man lights a match, and in the most atrocious German spells out a word – *Ka-pit-el* – and another word – *Ka-pitt-aal* – and so on for about twenty minutes – The End.

A third example from Croatia, this time from an exhibition catalogue from the above-mentioned gallery in Zagreb's old town: *GORGONA*, Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, Zagreb 1977. One of the members of the Gorgona Group was the painter Julije Knifer, who wrote a text which was published in both Serbo-Croatian and English. Here is the English version.

Request to the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences – Zagreb

I, the undersigned, for many reasons and purposes, appeal to the above title directly because:

1. I consider that the above institution is the only one competent to solve the questions and problems of other people's existence, which are either:

- a) successful existences
- b) unsuccessful existences

I count myself among the existences under item a) because:

I am still alive and still walk at all hours of the day and night, without any great difficulties, the streets of the town in which the above institution exists and works.

I, the undersigned, for the last time in legal possession of myself, ask the above title to accept my request which I present with deep appreciation for the purpose of freeing myself from my own identity. I return everything to you with much gratitude and once again thank you for everything. Your undersigned.

Julije Knifer

Common to these three examples is that, in a striking and concise way, they demonstrate complex relationships. To understand and appreciate them requires some understanding of the context in which these works are embedded. An understanding and appreciation of SWISSART, for example, requires some factual knowledge – one must recognize the Swiss airline's logo, and have some knowledge of the connections between art and economics in the twentieth century. It also requires a particular aesthetic attitude. If your approach to all visual art takes nineteenth century academy painting and the Impressionists as its governing models, problems will arise when you come upon a work like SWISSART. But for a person who has the necessary background knowledge and the right aesthetic sensitivity and who, furthermore, uses that knowledge and sensitivity in a relevant way – for such a person, the above-mentioned examples have about the same effect as would a pun on someone who understands it spontaneously.

One way to express the essence of this might be to make a distinction between *telling* and *showing*. Frank Palmer makes an attempt in this direction in his book *Literature and Moral Understanding* from 1992 (*telling and showing*, p. 188ff.). Clearly, there is some substance to this. It is one thing to describe the way the art market has evolved and changed; for example, the way sponsorship has changed from the Renaissance to our times. To make a concise and ingenious comment on this in pictures or words, or in some other way, is something else. An exposition of the entire field that surrounds SWISSART and makes it work as a striking contribution can be a fairly extensive undertaking, and perhaps a subject for doctoral dissertations, both on the history of art and on economics.

Damnjanovic's juxtaposition of Marx, Hegel and the Bible illustrates, without it being expressly formulated, the similarities between traditional religious approaches and a kind

of political behaviour that became fairly widespread in the twentieth century. It activates the theme of fundamentalism without using the word. Undeniably, the question of the depth of readers' understanding is also activated, almost to the point of suffering, accentuated by the protracted presentation and the absence of any aesthetic pictorial refinement that would have pleased the connoisseur. Not least for the connoisseur, Damnjanovic's presentation can be a taxing experience.

Interesting dissertations in comparative literature, the history of ideas and sociology could be written on the reception of Marxist texts in the twentieth century. The same is also true of Julije Knifer's humble request to be freed from his personal identity. To the initiated, Knifer's text is unsurpassable in its ironic brevity. But if the irony is to be effective, it presupposes some knowledge of the way that, with the help of different governing bodies, authoritarian régimes – among them, academies of arts and sciences – have attempted the detailed regulation of people's lives. As in the other examples, it is assumed that the observer possesses both a certain kind of factual knowledge and a certain kind of aesthetic sensitivity, and that he/she actually draws upon them in that particular situation.

It could be said that these three examples show, demonstrate, exemplify or depict complex circumstances, which could also be described, commented upon and analysed. It could be illuminating to express oneself in this way. Undeniably, SWISSART shows something that could also be described and analysed by a journalist or a researcher in the humanities, for example. At times, it may be to the point to say that there is a difference between *showing* something and *just telling* something. By analogy, it may sometimes be apposite to say that there is a difference between *showing* something and *just saying* something. It is one thing to know that a picture represents a floating ball, and another to look at a picture in a way that

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allows you to actually see the ball floating. It is one thing to talk about someone as being neurotic and describe some of the symptoms of his/her condition. It is another to show this in, for example, a text or a theatre performance.

But suppose we attempt a generalisation about art and science: 'Art shows it, science tells it.' The objections will come thick and fast. Of course, art tells us something too. In art there are descriptions, comments and analyses. And scientific contexts show something as well. Different relationships can be demonstrated, exemplified and portrayed. Palmer, to whom I referred above, discusses the question of whether it may be rewarding to say that literature has something to show us about life, as opposed to just telling us something about life. To illustrate what he wants to convey, he presents the following poem:

I am very unhappy
I got in debt through gambling
Then they took my house away
My wife deserted me
And took the children with her

Palmer suggests that if someone were to call himself a poet and in all seriousness publish this poem, then it would seem legitimate to object that the 'poem' lacks artistic merit because it speaks by 'telling', and consequently says nothing. Palmer goes on to say, 'With my bogus poem (above) all we seem to be given is a bare instruction to feel something, but it lacks the power to make us feel.' As an example of the opposite, a poet who not only tells but also shows or portrays, Palmer takes Pope's portrait of Lord Hervey in *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*. He quotes the following lines:

Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
This painted child of dirt that stinks and stings.

Palmer writes, ‘... Pope’s portrait of Lord Hervey (Sporus) says something that could not be said simply by being stated.’ It is evident that Frank Palmer appreciates literary skill. As a supplement to his own example, he quotes the following example from an anthology entitled *Love, Love, Love*:

I will bring you flowers
 every morning for your breakfast
 and you will kiss me
 with flowers in your mouth
 and you will bring me flowers
 every morning when you wake
 and look at me with flowers in your eyes

Palmer sees crass sentimentality in this opus, and notes the absence of something he finds in better poems by better poets. On reflection, he prefers to explicate the concept of ‘showing’ through the idea of *creating* to bring out the essence of literature: ‘...what the writer does not do is *create* his love there on the page (as Shakespeare does for instance in his sonnets)’.

Clearly, Palmer wants to focus on the way Pope and Shakespeare make use of literary devices. In literature, one can do things that cannot be done in pictures, he points out.

‘Pope’s portrait exploits the inexhaustible fund of associations and resonances of speech that is denied to the visual medium.’ I see no reason to advance the art of poetry at the expense of the visual arts as Palmer does. One can express oneself in a poem in ways that are not possible in pictures – and vice versa. Neither do I see any reason to reject simple texts as swiftly and categorically as does Palmer. Simplicity can be deliberate, as in the works of Göran Palm and Claes Andersson, for example.

There is so much to look forward to.
 Every Sunday there are the football pools and the lottery.

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Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday, there's Bingo.
It's only on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays
that nothing happens at all.

(From Claes Andersson's collection of poems,
Rumskamrater/Roommates/, 1974)

Simplicity can be precisely the right thing, as in a ballad by
Nils Ferlin or Evert Taube.

Imagine, I'm dancing with Andersson, little me,
little me with Fritiof Andersson.
Imagine being asked to dance by such a popular person!

(Evert Taube, the opening lines of *Rosa på bal*)

Simplicity derives its value from its context. It is related to resonance. The resonance occurs because a poem has its place in the space of poetry. All that is in the poem, and not least all that is not in the poem, is there in relation to other poems. A person who deliberately chooses the poem as a form, and who possesses the necessary skills, performs against a rich background. The poem is what it is by virtue of all the echoes created in the poetic space. And the same applies to other art genres. This is also true of a work like Palmer's little bogus poem. It is easy to imagine these lines in a collection of poems by some major poet, but then these lines would also take on a different meaning (which need not necessarily be ironic).

Every art form has its own devices and its own space. As you move from poem or novel, symphony or ballet to scientific presentations, you lose the devices peculiar to art, among them the echo effects. But there are other devices and other resonances instead.

This brings us to the theme of presentation in the sciences. Traditionally, literary historians have shown substantially more

interest in literary texts than scientific texts. But it is clearly the case that also scientific literature has its repertoire of genres and styles. There are genres that are strictly bound by form, and there are freer genres. As an extreme example of a structured scientific presentation, let us take the scientific journal article. Many professional journals in chemistry and medicine issue detailed instructions to potential contributors. Submitted manuscripts come under the intense scrutiny of professional 'referees', whose quality control is based on the application of stated and unstated rules of presentation (in addition to the methodological rules and suchlike). The result is a type of text that is at least as structured as the sonnet (or as the sonnet cycle, with the next sonnet beginning with the last line of the previous sonnet, and the final, fifteenth, sonnet consisting of the last lines of the previous fourteen sonnets). As an example of free scientific presentation we may take the essay, a form in which there must be a certain amount of freedom from the conventions of scientific presentation. The essay must not be too similar to an article or a thesis, as it is then no longer an essay. Neither may a scientific essay be too different from the scientific article or thesis, since it then ceases to be scientific. Just as with free verse, the free scientific presentation is surrounded by the conventions of the genre and governed by the power of the established models.

In other words, the conventions of presentation are just one of many features in all scientific paradigms. The scientific connoisseur can determine the tradition in which a scientific text is written with just as much speed and precision as an art historian can determine questions of attribution and dating by applying an acquired and refined sense of style.

We may say (with Palmer) that the art of literature is characterized by its inexhaustible fund of associations and resonances. We may add (in contrast to Palmer) that the visual

arts are characterized by their own, equally inexhaustible fund of associations and resonances. We may also add that the same is true of all forms of art. We may continue by saying that each scientific tradition is characterized by its own fund of associations and resonances. A scientific work belongs to one tradition or another or, in the case of paradigm-creating original work, it occupies a new space, a space that is also partly determined by earlier traditions. And, in the same way as an artistic work, a scientific work is what it is by virtue of both what exists and what does not exist in the work. In both the aesthetic and scientific contexts, it is true that only the connoisseur can see what does not exist in a particular work. To perceive what does not exist in a work, one must be familiar with a number of relevant objects of comparison. The echo effects, the resonances, are precisely what occur when comparisons are employed, either spontaneously or as a result of reflection.

A philosopher who chooses to write in dialogue form immediately places himself in a special space. The well-schooled and aware author of philosophical dialogue subscribes to a tradition that begins with Plato, continues with Berkeley and Hume in the eighteenth century and Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century and, if you will, with Wittgenstein in the twentieth century, to name some of prominent contributors to this particular philosophical genre. (Wittgenstein's style is sometimes described as a kind of inner dialogue.) The well-schooled and aware philosophical author who chooses the monologue as a form of presentation places himself by choice outside the tradition of dialogue, positioning himself somewhere amid the wealth of presentation traditions that include, for example, Aristotle, Descartes and Kant and their successors.

In the same way, the well-schooled and aware philosophical reader places a given work in an appropriate space with its own resonances. When Allan Janik reads Diderot's dialogue,

Rameau's Nephew, he sets it, inter alia, against the background of Plato's allegory of the cave. Diderot himself does not expressly set his dialogue against Plato's *The Republic* (which includes the allegory of the cave), but Janik finds it fruitful to do so. The task Janik sets himself in his essay, *Rameau's Nephew. Dialogue as Gesamtkunstwerk for Enlightenment (with constant reference to Plato)*, is to clarify Diderot's singular view of enlightenment. And this brings a link to the allegory of the cave close to hand. In Plato's story of the prisoners in the cave, the metaphors of light and darkness play a central role. A person who walks straight into the sunlight after dwelling in the darkness of the cave is distressed by the glare and can see nothing. A person who wants to see must make his way forward with caution. To begin with, one must understand the difference between real objects and the shadows that objects cast. The difference between reality and illusion must be learned. One may then gradually arrive at an understanding that knowledge of objects is also an illusion. Objects are, in their turn, shadows of what is actually real, that is to say, forms or ideas. The ideas may only be understood on an intellectual level. The enlightened former prisoner rejects all knowledge that is based on the senses, the body, as unreliable. Reliable knowledge has the nature of rational insight, not sensory experience.

According to Plato, there is a gap between the perfect world of logical truth and the world in which we actually live. When our attention is directed to that degree towards the world of ideas, a gap opens between knowledge and learning that is related to Plato's gap between body and soul. The proponents in the dialogue in *Rameau's Nephew* are called *I* and *He*. In all he does *He* is, above all, a physical being. *He* represents all that Plato attempts to distance himself from in the allegory of the prisoners in the cave, and in his philosophy as a whole. *He* is happy as a prisoner in the cave, unlike *I*, who, according to

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Allan Janik, personifies the values of Neo-Stoicism as they were understood around the middle of the eighteenth century. *I* is a reflective and critical intellectual with regular habits, in no way ascetic, but not a hedonistic worshipper of life either. Set against the background of Plato's criticism of hedonism *He's* defense of hedonism in Diderot's dialogue seems unusual. Many philosophers are dissatisfied with the Platonic view that virtue is the only genuine happiness, but they have rarely dared to defend hedonism and all it represents as Diderot does in *Rameau's Nephew*, in Allan Janik's view.

He shows an unusual degree of self-awareness. Compared to his famous uncle, the composer who revolutionised the discipline of harmony, *He* is a mediocre person who, in the absence of any other gifts, lives his life as a parasite. But he is an aware parasite. He is no hypocrite. With Plato's interests as a background, Diderot also appears to be original in his choice of theme: sincerity and genuineness versus bigotry and dissemblance. 'In short, for Diderot, unlike Plato, the most serious aspect of the problem of appearance and reality concerns not simply ignorance but *hypocrisy* within the cave', as Janik puts it. Sincerity and genuineness are, says Janik, values that are absent in Plato's imaginary world and that came to the secularised enlightenment of the eighteenth century as Jansenism and the tradition from Augustine. (See also Allan Janik, *From Montaigne to Diderot: Pascal, Jansenism and the Dialectics of Inner Theater*.) That Janik should focus on that particular theme in Diderot's dialogue is not surprising to those who have read Janik and Toulmin's book, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*. Without it being expressly stated, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* is perhaps the most important piece in the space in which Janik places Diderot's dialogue.

Plato considered music to be a suspect art form. That Diderot chooses the form of the presentation that he does is appropriate

against that background. It is often said that *Rameau's Nephew* is structured as a suite, a musical form that was popular in the eighteenth century. A suite in this sense is 'a series of dances interrupted by purely musical sections in a loosely-ordered sequence, usually in the same key,' (quoted from Janik). If the conversations in Diderot's dialogue are seen as the purely musical components and the nephew's imitative performances as dance, it may be said that Diderot's work has the form of a suite. For those who want to question Plato's sharp distinctions between body and soul, the sensory and the intellectual, selecting a musical form is a good choice. Music invalidates Plato's dualism in its combination of sensual beauty and strict intellectual structure, as Allan Janik puts it.

Every art form has its own special possibilities and limitations. In a woodcut one can make use of the structure of the block of wood; in a lithograph it is the stone that opens and closes. In the same way, the different traditions of scientific presentation have their openings and their closings. Clearly, it would be far too much of an oversimplification to say that art portrays reality in one way and science in another. There are things that art achieves that cannot be done by scientific means, and what can and cannot be done shifts from one art form to another. Similarly, there are things that can be done by scientific means that cannot be done in art; shifting from one branch of science to another.

If, in conclusion, I were to venture a very general statement on what science can achieve that art cannot, it would be the following. Scientific presentations are characterized by a special discipline, or to be more precise, a family of attitudes and actions that are the result of the changing paths of discipline in the world of science. One aspect of this discipline we may expect to find in all the different areas of science is the result of the *conceptual training* that is an essential component of all

science. Of all the scientific devices, I would place particular emphasis on the conceptual apparatuses, which are indispensable in all forms of science. The conceptual devices are constitutive components of all scientific patterns and activities.

References

The full title of Frank Palmer's book referred to in the text above is *Literature and Moral Understanding. A Philosophical Essay on Ethics, Aesthetics, Education and Culture*, Oxford 1992.

The poem by Claes Anderson is also included in his book *Det som blev ord i mig. Dikter 1962–1987*, Stockholm 1987.

The two essays by Allan Janik referred to in this chapter are included in Bo Göranson (ed.), *Skill, Technology and Enlightenment: On Practical Philosophy*, London etc. 1995.

The constitutive role of concepts in all science is the main theme of Thomas S. Kuhn's bestseller *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962 and later editions.