

EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

ART, SCIENCE AND GLOBALIZATION

In the Fall of 1962, this (then) nineteen-year-old editor was a transfer student at Ruskin College, Oxford. Ruskin (then and now) is a two-year institution attached to Oxford University, sponsored by the British Trades Union Congress.¹ On one occasion during that semester, Ruskin hosted another college in Oxfordshire in two friendly tournaments: a football (soccer) match, and a debate. The debaters were to propose and reject, respectively, the proposition: “This House holds that humanity owes more to the arts than to the sciences.” I was asked to propose the motion for Ruskin, and in a mood of collegiality I agreed to do this, although, as a more mature student colleague told me, “this is the sort of thing the bourgeoisie debate among themselves; you shouldn’t have any part of it.” I had already agreed to debate, and

1 I am writing in Athens, Greece, in my office at the D.Phil. Program in Economics of the University of Athens, in the shadow of the Acropolis, which is visible from my window. This doctoral program is funded and sponsored by the General Confederation of Hellenic Workers. It is not accidental or insignificant that trade unions have been central to my higher educational experiences, on both sides of the teaching divide and across many decades.

did my best, although the vote of the house went against me (largely, I was told, because Ruskin had won the football match earlier in the day and a debate outcome favorable to the other college was therefore “in the cards”).

Now, almost half a century later, I find myself thinking about the relation between science and art — although assuredly not about which contributes “more” to humanity! Can artistic approaches “tell” us things about reality that science cannot reveal, at least by itself? Any attempt to define the distinction between art and science, or between artistic and scientific approaches to a given object, seems to partake of the scientific side of the divide and therefore to be unfair to art, but consider for a moment a simple conception of the distinction that I draw from the cultural anthropologist Leslie White: science is about abstraction and generalization, while art is about concretization and particularization. (Leave aside the political-economy concept of “real abstraction” for the moment.) If we follow this idea a bit, we arrive at a remarkable place:

Hegel, in tracing the process of coming to know the object, offered, famously, what has become known as the dialectic of cognition. The pre-given object, in its sensuous and disorderly perceived state, is negated in the first moment of this dialectic through a process of distillation or abstraction to reveal its essence. This is the paradoxical, even ironic, loss of information necessary to reveal the inner reality of the object. In the second moment of this process, the essence is used to re-order or reconstruct the concrete object. This second negation completes what might

be called the scientific dialectic. Crucially, the reality of the object is constituted both by its essence and by the forms of appearance of that essence, as reconstructed into a rich totality. “Essentialism” is the loss of that unity of essence with appearance and conflation of essence with the object itself.

Now, however, we can perceive an entirely different dimension. The original pre-given object was concrete, from the standpoint of the dialectic heretofore described, but presumably not absolutely concrete! Suppose we start with that object, but instead of abstracting/concentrating/distilling, we go more deeply into the fissures and textures and contingent possibilities inhering in the object, by an opposite process that might be called infusation. We reach for the highest degree of differentiation, looking for hidden meanings, layerings, potential signifiers, emotional resonances, sensuous possibilities, to reach — in this first moment of the artistic dialectic — a rich contra-essence that, like the abstract essence of the scientific dialectic, is also invisibly present in the “naive” object. The second moment of the artistic dialectic, then, will be a return to the reconstructed abstract of the original object, but now with a sense of beauty, wonder, awe, outrage, connection, achieved through our journey from the posited object to its concrete contra-essence and then back “outward” to a reconstructed sense of a more richly determined reality.

Could it be that classical Hegelian epistemology had hold of one pole of this combined scientific–artistic dialectic, but had not explored the other? If so, this

might clarify some aspects of the relation between art and science, and their mutually supporting roles. Art, then, is not simply about enjoyment or pleasure, even higher pleasure, and this may be the final answer to “art for art’s sake”: art captures the “feeling tones” that aid in the “suspension of doubt” that is in turn necessary for science to progress. (Recall how scientists and mathematicians speak of the beauty or elegance of a concept or theorem.) It can also help reveal false abstractions, and so may play a vital role at moments of paradigm shift. It looks for the “play” in the interstices between spaces created by scientific categories, and in this way keeps dialectical sensibility in the picture. It provides the necessary detachment that can only come from senses of humor, irony, emotional involvement — and, yes, outrage.

Which brings us to the multifaceted contemporary process of globalization, and a striking recent example of artistic coming-to-terms with that process.

In 2007 the Greek artist Danae Stratou presented her installation entitled “CUT – 7 Dividing Lines.” She traveled to seven places around the world where fences and walls (real and metaphorical) create and sustain divisions among the people on whom they are imposed. (The seven sites are identified and described below.) She traveled for about 60,000 kilometers; took some 15,000 photographs; eventually chose 14 of these, arranged in seven pairs (one for each site). Each pair constitutes an opposition, a unity, a tension, and in the installation (which has been exhibited internationally before settling down at the Emfietzoglou Collection in

Athens) each photo is printed on a large transparent perspex and displayed opposite its pair, creating a diaphanous visual corridor that the viewer walks through, experiencing the horror of the division, but also the aspiration to heal, to “let the mind’s eye fill in the chasm.” In Stratou’s own words:

Seven open wounds. Seven lines on the planet where political, economic, nationalist or religious tension has long ago shaped impenetrable divisions. Some constitute natural landmarks that humans have appropriated as dividers; others are utterly artificial. A few coincide with ill-defined state borders, usually ceasefire lines. All of them are founded on unresolved issues and relentless claims. They procure fluidity, uncertainty, death. Around them, however, the desire abounds for a normal life.²

Here is a quick tour of the locations. (These are paraphrases from the documentation that accompanies the exhibit.)

The Green Line, Nicosia, Cyprus. Here is the barbed wire barrier dividing Greek and Turkish Cypriots. One photo shows a UN watchtower, houses in the occupied part of Nicosia, soldiers, sentry points, “no entry” warnings. The other, two Turkish Cypriot children playing football in the shadow of the barrier, the “Green

2 In this case it is trite in the extreme to say that a picture is worth a thousand words. The installation, among many other projects, is available for viewing at www.danaestratou.com.

Line,” the strain for normality within a dividing nightmare that has been in existence since 1974.

North/South Mitrovica, Kosovo(a). One shot from the northern bank of the Ibar river, another from the southern bank. The river divides Mitrovica, the last Kosovar city with a significant Serbian population. The north bank is their final stronghold in the Albanian-dominated province. There is a footbridge, unguarded, the last link between the two sides.

The Badme Minefields, dividing Ethiopia and Eritrea . A UN mine-clearing truck patrols the killing fields around Badme, where tens of thousands of soldiers, both Eritrean and Ethiopian, died in 1999. “Eritrea,” of course, was a creation of Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa. The UN “resolved” the dispute by drawing an arbitrary dividing line, cutting through the local community that long pre-dated the 20th-century political entities.

Belfast, Northern Ireland. Photos of Loyalist and Nationalist murals, Shankill Road and Falls Road, respectively. The “Peace Walls,” cutting through rows of terrace houses and their backyards, grow in tandem with the peace process between Protestants and Catholics, and new sections are continuously added, often by popular demand, reflecting the profound ambivalence in the relations among wall-divided existence, the past experience of bloodshed, and social consciousness.

The West Bank, Palestine. Photos: on one side, the Israeli Army, the weapons and vehicles and structures enforcing the occupation. On the other, the Wall as a

colossal prison fence. Various spray-painted messages on the Wall help ameliorate its menacing presence. The Wall meanders through the countryside, revealing a plan to control, to appropriate, and, ultimately, to divide.

The Line of Control, Kashmir. The LOC forms along a mountain ridge and a river, natural barriers turned into human ones. There are military convoys, checkpoints, sentries, lines, fences, dividing long-existing communities, victims of the dispute that emerged from the British-engineered division of one country into India and Pakistan.

Pacific Ocean Border Fence, U. S.–Mexico border. Rails from railroad lines have been (mis)-appropriated, used as vertical poles jutting out of the sand on the beach, dividing two communities of beach-goers. This “fence” is strikingly symbolic: easy to walk through, it is still surrounded by patrol jeeps, helicopters, electronic surveillance devices. On the southern side, Tijuana folks simply enjoying the beach. Further inland, the U. S. National Guard continues to upgrade the fence dividing Mexico from the United States, with Israeli wall-builders contributing their expertise.

The various walls, fences, no-man’s lands, and barbed-wire barriers have complex and varied histories, and the motivations behind their construction undoubtedly differ. Barriers have been erected to forestall invasion, to forestall cultural, economic or political penetration, to contain ethnic divisions, to inflame ethnic divisions, to regulate the flow of labor. Ostensibly varied as the motivating

conflicts may be — often stemming from religious, ethnic, and linguistic divisions that have deep roots in past history — the barriers have become part of the landscape of capitalist globalization, and derive their present functionality from that context. Their spread rivals the worldwide surge of markets, commercialization and finance; indeed, it is part of that surge. The intensely contradictory unity of barrier dissolution and barrier erection is one of those moments which art and political economy (science) can only work together to grasp.

Herein lies the importance of Danae Stratou's CUT – 7 Dividing Lines. Danae's husband, Yanis Varoufakis (also, hardly coincidentally, a long-time Science & Society contributor and Contributing Editor), in a statement accompanying the project exhibit, sums up his view of the wider significance of CUT as follows:

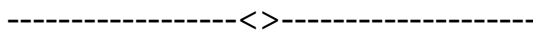
Not too long ago, globalization was being heralded as the process to dismantle all borders. It has not. Instead, as trade and capital are liberated from border controls, the fences and dividing lines that separate people keep getting less porous, taller, more intimidating. Allah and God are often blamed, but, in truth, they are just scapegoats for purely secular forces that would never even allow the competing gods the impossible task of drawing “just” borders between their people. Therein lies the Great Paradox: the more we develop reasons to, and means for, dismantling the dividing lines the less powerful the forces who are working for their dismantling. Deep divisions, patrolled by merciless guards, seem to be the homage that our enterprise culture

pays to misanthropy.

Two great lessons are emerging. First, globalization is, inescapably, capitalist globalization. Just as Marx, 150 years ago, pointed to the glaring contradiction of capital, seeking its own fulfillment, calling into existence the proletariat, the agent of its own ultimate destruction; so today capitalist globalization calls into existence — however slowly, and painfully, and partially — a worldwide working class with universal consciousness, capacities, and aspirations. This system can and must globalize capital, but it cannot globalize labor, without seriously compromising its own capacity for self-reproduction. And so, the Paradox: markets, and walls.

Second, the artist's view of this monumental contradiction is not just a supplement; it is not merely icing on the political economist's cake. It represents the second half of the complete dialectic of cognition: we grasp reality, and acquire the capacity to change reality, not only by following the classical Hegelian path to the abstract essence and then back to the reconstructed concrete, but also by reaching for all of the sensual and contingent determinations in the contra-essential ultimate concrete, subsequently returning to the reconstructed abstract, armed with a full sense of the power and beauty and latent possibility that is part of the reality itself. We can then grasp the universality of the human experience, which gives us the moral and political weapons to tear down the walls; the rich uniqueness of each human life; and the awe-inspiring endless beauty of each moment of life's experience

— and that of course is what makes the struggle worthwhile.



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