

# INTRODUCTION

What is art and how are we to understand it? These are interesting and difficult questions, for art is a fascinating and complex subject. Universal in its scope, throughout all human cultures art has taken a bewildering multiplicity of forms, in the many arts—story-telling, painting and sculpture, music, dance—and in the immense variety of forms within any art—song, instrumental music, opera, symphony, string quartet, brass ensemble, sonata, fantasy, but also ceremonial, folk, popular, dance, and classical music, and much more. It is controversial whether there is a common essence to art that pervades the many arts and genres in Western cultures, and far more controversial when we include other cultures. There have been periods when the notion of an essence to art was rejected, when emphasis in criticism was placed on understanding individual works of art, but where a general, philosophical understanding of art was held to be impossible. Yet even emphasizing the individual work of art is frequently inappropriate to nonWestern cultures, where art is often ceremonial and communal.

The selections in this collection do not take so particular and pessimistic a view toward understanding the nature of art, but compose a wide and frequently insightful array of views on the nature and importance of art in human experience. The variety is so great, however, that bewilderment may seem the most natural response. Yet the variety of different points of view is testimony not only to the imaginative inventiveness of philosophers confronted with the complexity of artistic achievements, but to the complexity and variety of artistic works themselves. Art is so difficult to understand because it has taken so many forms, because artists have utilized their powers in remarkably diverse and accomplished ways.

Art is interesting and important enough. But the question of the nature of art, particularly of the way we are to understand it, is a far more complex question than one addressing art alone. How we are to understand art raises

questions both about the nature of our understanding of so rich a phenomenon and about the singularity and uniqueness of that phenomenon in the context of other human achievements, even our understanding of the natural world.

A natural view is that art tells us something about the world. This is the fundamental impulse behind mimetic theory. But if so, then what art tells us is either similar to and testable against what science and philosophy tell us, leading to direct confrontation, or else is entirely different, raising possibilities of alternative realities and of alternative pathways to their realization. An equally natural view, given the remarkable emotional power of many works of art, is that art speaks to the emotions, that the purpose of art is to arouse our feelings and to give us pleasure. A difficulty here is that many of the greatest works cause us pain or make us weep, and that the gaining of pleasure, however desirable, seems to have no great importance, is at best a minor achievement.

If we believe that understanding the nature of reality is the highest achievement of which human beings are capable, then it is natural to suppose that if art is important, it offers such an understanding, or else is unimportant if it cannot do so. To understand art here is to understand something about understanding itself as well as the world surrounding us. In his dialogues, Plato sometimes suggests that art cannot give adequate knowledge of reality: therefore, art is minor, however tantalizing, and distracts us from those activities that offer adequate knowledge. In other places, in myths and stories, and in the dramatic form of his dialogues, Plato seems to suggest that the truth of poetry and myth is the highest that we can know.

If we believe that gratification and pleasure are the best we can achieve in our lives, that all our activities either are or should be devoted to gaining pleasure and avoiding pain, then art also is to be judged by the pleasures and pains it produces. Works that do not please us may be discarded. Works that fail to arouse our emotions are weak and empty.

There is another alternative, that art is neither a form of understanding competitive with science and philosophy nor a form of activity devoted to gratification. Art is rather a unique and singular form of human spirituality. If we take this view, however, we have the responsibility for explaining and making intelligible what this form of activity may be, given that it is neither a form of knowledge nor a form of action. The most famous and influential theory of the singularity and uniqueness of art is Kant's, and anyone who would attempt to understand the nature of art is forced to come to terms with Kant's theory. Kant emphasizes that art achieves a beauty that we share in common, through taste, but is not rule-governed, leading to Romanticism's view of genius. Kant also develops a theory of the sublime in art, that art can give us a sense of what surpasses any possibility of representation. Both of these are possibilities in art that Kant claims can be found neither in scientific understanding nor moral reason. It is worth remembering that Kant developed his theory of art relatively late in life, that before his *Critique of Judgment*

he held essentially an anthropological position on art, maintaining that we can classify and analyze the ways in which different human beings respond to different works of art in different societies, but that there is no singular essence to art, no concepts fundamental to aesthetic experience.

Kant exerted a powerful influence on Western views of art, and until the middle of the twentieth century, art was considered neither a form of knowledge nor a form of practice. One of the most important views in this context is that art is expressive, primarily of emotion, but that expression is to be distinguished both from knowledge of emotion and from the production or elicitation of emotions in an audience. Tolstoy's status in the history of the theory of art is guaranteed by his having, virtually alone, taken a forthright and consistent position on the importance of arousing and transmitting emotions through art.

Recent writings, in both Europe and the United States, have returned to the view that art provides important truths of human experience and nature. Some of the most striking Anglo-American theories, such as Goodman's, are symbolic: artistic symbols function cognitively but with singular properties that distinguish them from symbols in science and propositional language. Continental writers share this view in part, but frequently subscribe to a profound suspicion of the limits of scientific understanding and a conviction that there are forms of knowledge that plumb the depths of the human condition and the world—forms, like art, which can tolerate an ambiguity and indeterminateness in nature and truth that are incompatible with propositional discourse. Such discussions follow a different line in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, much closer to the sublime, concerned with the limits of representation. On such views, propositional discourse is a form of representation. Nietzsche found in Kant's sublime the idea of a truth at or beyond the limits of representation, pertaining to art. On such a view of truth, truth works not by correspondence or representation, but by opening nature to language and thought, an event much closer to art on this view than science.

The emergence of such views of the truth of art has been accompanied by a critique of the priority of the scientific world view. One of the major factors in this change of perspective is an emphasis, prominent in Wittgenstein and Heidegger, upon the social and human conditions of any human activity, including science and art. This has had profound consequences for the theory of art and the interpretation of works of art. In particular, recent philosophers have emphasized the cultural and social milieux in which works of art are produced and interpreted. Feminist writings have made enduring contributions to how we understand art and science in cultural and social terms. More recently, multicultural writings have brought claims that art and other cultural forms have been understood in Western writing to the detriment of non-Western artists. Many multicultural writers suggest that our entire understanding of art is distorted in favor of Western institutions.

Not only are works of art almost infinitely various but interpretations of works of art are also extraordinarily diverse, in many cases appearing to admit

no norms and criteria that would allow us to choose among incompatible interpretations. Thus, whatever our view of the relation between art and truth, there is the further question of whether we can know what is true about works of art so that we can interpret them correctly.

The literature on criticism and interpretation of works of art turns almost entirely on this question. There are those who believe that interpretive questions are scientific and descriptive questions, that we should be able, taking the human context into account, looking to both artist and audience, to resolve all interpretive questions satisfactorily in principle. Others are more impressed by the diversity of incompatible interpretations of works of art. At the extreme, we find the plurality of interpretations inherent in art paradigmatic for all understanding, leading both to Gadamer's general hermeneutic epistemological theory, in which all knowledge is treated as analogous to the interpretation of texts, striving among divergent perspectives for an authoritative interpretation, and to Derrida's far more extreme position, in which no standards and norms can be considered authoritative. Derrida's writing manifests great suspicion of every authority, demanding an unrelenting critical alertness in interpretation and understanding. Such a view of understanding and criticism requires all the resources we can muster and invent, and demands endless reinterpretation.

Art is one of the major achievements of the human spirit. As Gadamer argues, it is our fundamental concern to understand art in terms that reflect the truly magnificent achievement it is. However, the question of the importance of art is inseparable from the question of what else is important in human experience—questions of the nature of humanity and the world. From this perspective, questions of the nature of art and of how we are to understand it are among the most important questions concerning the nature of who we are, what we are capable of, and where we dwell. That is surely a primary motive behind our concern with understanding art.