

ABSTRACTION AND FIGURATION: OUTMODED AESTHETIC DISPUTES

The ardent antagonism between two aesthetic parties, figuration and abstraction, which for more than half a century has stamped art history in old Europe, with increasingly overlapping implications for youthful America, Japan and many other places, today tends to reduce itself to being simply the anecdotal imprint of an era: in the final analysis it seems already condemned to disappear in favor of a notion of complementarity and even synthesis.

That the reader may understand me correctly, it is not a matter here, in the name of some derisory dogmatism, of declaring living works outmoded. On the contrary it is the end of all aesthetic dogmatism that seems evident, in particular all abstract or figurative theories, or even ideologies. The works are another matter altogether. Magnificent abstract works, just as magnificent figurative works, are today full of power and can remain so tomorrow and beyond, together with others that fall at the edges of or that straddle the common boundaries between abstraction and figuration.

Translated by R. Scott Walker

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Artists are often much better rooted in the reality of their works than in the theories they profess, *a fortiori* if the latter emanate from professionals of ideas who claim to steer artists around like mahouts do with elephants.

Many so-called “abstract” artists still claim a monopoly on modernity, even though *Abstraction* as a school is more than three quarters of a century old¹, as they claim to shunt the “figuratives” off to a reputedly obsolete realm. At the same time the pseudo “Ancients” assure us—and personally I am inclined to agree—that depicting nature is perennial since it is bound up with man as such. They look to the future with confidence, for iconoclasm is always destined to failure. However, figurative artists often hold unjust views of abstraction.

One need only look around to note that it is not enough simply to be figurative or abstract in order to show proof of genius, or even mere talent—or the lack of it. There is genius in both camps, and this alone is modernity. In both camps there are harmonious and moving manners of organizing plastic space, and such organization is the sole specifically artistic problem. That artists of one or the other tendency doubt this is normal, for the flesh is weak. That dealers exaggerate it is also normal, though less excusable. That scribes and paid thurifers join the chorus is typical. But that non-professionals in the art field, political or administrative leaders, drawing-room wits and “amateurs” of all kinds join the fracas and stand unconditionally for or against abstraction or figuration of today and tomorrow never ceases to amaze me.

Naturally a person may be led by a certain sensitivity at a given moment toward certain categories of works. This is a question of taste, which by nature is free and subjective, as well as being susceptible to change over time within the same individual. For

¹ “Kandinsky is said to have invented the first abstract painting in 1908 (however, it wasn’t he, but Picabia in 1907),” states Georges Mathieu (*L’Abstraction prophétique*, Gallimard, 1984). In any case, Apollinaire initiated at the time the notion of “pure painting,” “entirely new art,” in reaction to both narrative painting, daughter of the historical “*grand genre*” painting of the classical age and to the instantaneous translation of nature sought by the Impressionists and the Fauvists, following Courbet and Manet. The notion of “pure painting” benefited from an abundance of highly diverse stimuli, such as the *a priori* theories of Seurat, Cézanne, the Cubists and Constructivists as well as the dream-like tendencies of Gauguin, Odilon Redon, Maurice Denis, the Nabis and Surrealists, in which it was practically dissolved.

each person's sensitivity evolves for various reasons, in particular through repeated contact with works of art. The danger is to claim justification for one's tastes of the moment with intellectual arguments, for in the realm of art intellectual arguments can prove anything while they justify nothing. There is no criterion *erga omnes*. There is and never will be a principle that makes it possible to judge objectively "this is good" and "this is bad". Everyone has the right to say "this pleases me", or "I don't like that". But no one, no matter how expert he may claim to be, has the right to exercise supreme authority in this domain for everyone else. The realms of expertise encompass the material authenticity of a work, its attribution and date, along with diverse techniques that buttress historical knowledge. Apart from these areas, the expert who claims to decide *coram populo* does so in the name of ideologies, overt or covert, or in the name of other interests that have nothing to do with art. Reputable critics came forward to label definitively as bad painting the works of Monet, Cézanne or Braque. It would be wrong to think this was accidental. The same thing is still going on, to the detriment of authentic artists, and it will continue.

Open minds, at least, should avoid like the plague the temptation to excommunicate a work of art for the single reason that it is abstract or figurative. This has no more meaning, from the artistic point of view, than to declare it ugly because lemon yellow predominates or because it represents an austere landscape or even a skinny female nude. Pedants condemn in the name of less naive criteria, but they are just as ridiculous upon closer analysis.

But to open minds this two-fold truth will appear increasingly evident: figurative art is not outmoded, abstract art will not disappear. They are complementary.

FIGURATIVE ART IS NOT "OUTMODED". ONLY CONVENTIONALISM IS, AND IT IS EVERYWHERE. THERE ARE NO SPECIAL NURSERIES FOR LIVING ART.

When art historians in the year 2000 begin to examine the present era, giving it, as we say today, a new reading, it will be fascinating to follow the research into the circumstances and deliberate actions which, since the end of World War II, have led either to broadly overlooking or conspicuously disdaining a considerable share of

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truly living art because it was figurative. Each age has its style, of course. But in France, for example, what complicity has been evident between major commercial enterprises, snobbish sophistication and bad official procedures, that encouraged and maintained faddish winds, as violent and continuous as a winter blizzard, through every political regime and longer than certain "terrorisms" in the literary world.² With certain nuances and at differing times, the same phenomenon occurred in many other countries.

Rehabilitation procedures will multiply, and soon the long eclipse of certain groups of artists (whose reinstatement will be greatly amplified by the sophistication and the internationalization of the art market) will look like the equivalent of the opposition in the latter 19th century that resisted Impressionism and the schools that followed. In the second half of our own century it was the unbroken evolution of the figuration of nature that sought to discredit the strange coalition of disparate trends.

Already underway is the complete revision of amalgams that had charged certain words like figuration, academicism and conventionalism with compact and misleading meanings. Re-examination will make it possible to remove from conventionalism those areas, activities, attitudes, works and institutions that have been wrongly included therein; conversely a "pluralist conventionalism" will appear. For it is not because certain artistic paths were opened up just yesterday or the day before that they are immune from conventionalism; some slipped into the trap in the same way older currents had before, sometimes even more so to the extent that these more recent currents at times required much less "craftsmanship" or at times accorded great importance to the makeshift. One is free to appreciate or not the work of Marcel Duchamp; however, the fact remains that, by exhibiting a bicycle wheel on a stool in New York in 1914, then a bottle rack and, in 1917, a urinal labeled "fountain", he introduced into art an

² In France, for example, after painters like Ceria, Caillard, Gromaire, Goerg, Desnoyer, Roland Oudot, Legueult, Planson and Brianchon, and sculptors like Despiau, Niclaussé, Wlerick, Navarre, Janniot, Belmondo, Hilbert—and many others as well!—all now gone, many artists still alive today have been unjustly "forgotten" by the majority of those who hold cultural power, or even openly put down as representing an "outmoded" trend.

attitude that will continue to have an historic importance. But all-encompassing derision quickly becomes derisory itself. Scandal repeated indefinitely and systematically no longer scandalizes and loses all power. We can take delight in or be upset by the appearance, among artistic means, of new techniques that distort traditional media or that substitute a sometimes extraordinarily complicated device. But no code allows imprisoning artistic expression in categories that are fixed once and for all. Nevertheless, technological innovation is not necessarily generative of masterpieces; nor does technical progress have the power to render older media sterile. It is possible not to appreciate abstract art; however, it does represent a conquest of new aesthetic realms through an intense scrutiny of centuries-old conventions. Yet this did not give it either the power to eliminate figurative art or the power to be immune from conventionalism.

Conventionalism flourishes abundantly in every garden. It is the art of epigones that sprouts up everywhere, constantly repeating archetypes without being able to avoid fading into stereotypes.

Nevertheless, behind the rare giants, who from time to time in all the arts break down, crack open and rip apart perspectives by introducing a new vision, there are true artists working in an unbroken chain to ensure the flow of living art by concentrating, in the depths of their consciousness, a hitherto unseen element that they transfer into pre-existing formats. This dose of authenticity fundamentally distinguishes them from descendants who have nothing to add to what has been done before them. Such true artists exist in every trend, abstract and figurative. Their aesthetic persuasion alone does not classify their value, any more than it can guarantee the authenticity of their personal creation. They must introduce some new inflection relative to what preceded them; they must modulate in some personal manner, no matter how little, what others have already expressed. Then their vocation is justified. Whatever may be the school they lay claim to or are attributed to, their art is living and consequently cannot be termed "outmoded." This word is inappropriate. Here we are not in the realm of scientific thinking where a discovery can definitively cancel, for the future, a heretofore reigning theory. We are not in the commercial sphere where technical arguments are brought forward to stem a competitive tide. No technical, scientific or

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philosophical argument is or will ever be capable of discrediting nature as an inexhaustible source of inspiration, any more than abstraction as a means of expression. In both cases authentic artists will always continue to discover something hidden.

It is the very mark of artistic knowledge to be capable of feeling something absolutely new, no matter how small, and this is the seal of living art.

For the art-lover, this irrefutable aspect, this absolute uniqueness through which an artist differentiates himself from every other artist, radiates the thrill of life throughout the work and gives an incomparable feeling, even if the art-lover were to measure his enjoyment on the strict scale of the proportion of newness he might be able to discover in the work, like a professor coldly grading essays.

An aesthetic feeling is, in truth, not a simple phenomenon. It is easier to thrill to what is already imprinted in us than to something unknown. We react to what we know, to what our sensitivity recognizes, and only too often we like or we reject summarily without even perceiving what is new. We are all no doubt conditioned by the well-trod path. Even when we take pleasure in seeking something new, even when we say, "Surprise me," most often this is within narrow limits beyond which the new will not attain us. Or else, changing our taste because we are tired of artistic forms too long held in favor, we fall under the charm of forms we had previously neglected and to which we attribute an objectively unmerited coefficient of novelty.

Be that as it may, it is not every day we discover some startling innovation, or every decade or even every generation. This is just as true of figurative art as it is of abstract art. It has been true in every age. There have been, of course, very lean periods and other astonishingly rich ones. No matter how great it may be or how historically important it may seem, an innovation cannot totally eclipse everything surrounding it. It can never cancel or render "outmoded" all the works that appear in other aesthetic trends, even those whose share of newness is incomparably more modest. From the viewpoint of innovative force, the republic of the arts is made up of rare giants and of many creators of more modest size. The role of the latter should not be underestimated in the continuum of artistic life, which is not composed exclusively of

revolutions or of falling into line, despite constantly repeated attempts and manifestos trumpeted every other day. Not even genius has dictatorial powers. Nothing obliges a person to share its views or to join its school. Genius is admirable, but it cannot claim to have wiped out everything else. And this is a good thing. Liberty is above even genius. Alongside it there have always been different schools in which authentic talent could flourish.

II. ABSTRACT ART IS NOT A FORTUITOUS AND EPHEMERAL CREATION; IT DRAWS ITS LEGITIMACY FROM THE SAME SOURCES AS FIGURATION

Every artist, whether consciously or not, makes himself the center of the infinite richness of the created world. Faced with the contradictions of this world, with its surface troubles and its subterranean conflicts provoked by Apollonian, Dionysian and Saturnian currents, every work of art either attempts to sum them all up or else selects some fragmentary aspect that it magnifies to excess, balancing or unbalancing forces and forms, harmonizing or syncopating rhythms, harmonizing or exaggerating expressions, resisting firmly or abandoning itself totally.

From this point of view the art of Classical Greek sculptors, eminently luminous, and Celtic art, gloriously stigmatized by obscure forces, resemble one another: in their striking contrasts, by the absence of a visible concern for synthesis; and in this they both differ from the paintings of Lascaux, of Rembrandt, of Watteau or Van Gogh.

Abstraction and figuration can be considered from this same perspective. But even though both combine facility and daring, they are not the same. To affirm oneself primarily by the elimination of the visible world is facility; attaining the splendid liberty of a musician who constructs his universe with relationship as pure as mathematics is daring.

Likewise an entire segment of abstract art, particularly at the beginning, in emulation of figurative Cubism, is based on geometry, which is itself a figurative code, more abstract but more rigid and narrower than nature. Some were not long in abandoning it or in seeking another form with neophile reasoning. A cloud

descended on the world of forms like the Dark Night of the mystics, unleashed energies that dismembered every structure for possible renaissances. Then came the time of the psyche laid bare, of the psyche alone: the agony and intoxication of expressing only one's self through lines and splotches composed like sounds.

Emulation led to the single color canvas, then to the exhibition of a bare canvas, finally to the very destruction of the canvas, by iron or by fire. And indeed this happened. Beyond this point, abstraction requires total abstention.

Let us not play with words, then; this is not our purpose. As a whole the plastic arts, including all those called "abstract" or "formless" (geometric, lyric, surrealist, kinetic, action painting, etc.) by nature cannot escape from "form," from the "concrete" (volume, surface, colors, textures, granulations, etc.), any more than from the figuration of a set of signs, no matter how evanescent they may be. Conversely, in every figurative work, even in the most figurative photographs, there is abstraction; we are, in certain respects, always beyond the real.

It is also good to consider abstract art for what it means to be: an art freed of any reference to visible reality. This declared intention of excluding any reference to visible reality was, historically, the innovation, much more than the thing itself.³

Abstraction has always haunted painting, precisely to the extent that an artist abandoned himself to his genius. This can be abundantly seen, thanks to the trend of producing full-page illustrations in art books that depict not entire works but details. In this way abstract images can be presented by isolating and

³ Even if we overlook the purely decorative expression found in fully abstract creations or in the elements of abstract decoration surrounding figurative motifs, for example in Irish illuminations, in the Ravenna mosaics, in stained glass windows and Romanesque frescoes. But is it possible to distinguish with certainty among artistic creations, in order to assign them a, by definition, pejorative coefficient, works that could be called "decorative"? In any case, and to return to our topic, we may recall the remark made by Robert Rey, in a pamphlet published some thirty years ago (*Contre l'art abstrait*, Flammarion, 1957): "Abstract art is, literally, the oldest thing in the world! The first cave man who dragged his muddy fingers along the wall of his cave, for no other reason than to alleviate its bareness, was a great 'abstract artist'. And, no matter how far we go back in time, everything that men have touched crawls with abstract art." And he added, "Abstract art theory-makers always begin by referring to ancient ceramic and textile decorations."

enlarging fragments of paintings from every period and from every civilization, even going back to cave paintings. Without the necessary distance, these fragments become indecipherable. Consider, for example, a button or a ribbon on the garments of a Goya figure. Seen from a distance, the result is strikingly perfect. But if we come up close, there is a point at which the button or the ribbon disappears, becoming a play of brushstrokes apparently unrelated to what these strokes represent. It is evident, consequently, that “abstraction” is linked to the plastic arts by nature because of the laws of optics. This is moreover so because of what is essential to all art: the projection of a temperament onto nature. Because of this projection every artist renders nature with a coloring that is properly his own and tends to camouflage it to the eyes of others.⁴ When temperament becomes totalitarian, projection becomes occultation.

But nature mocks such operations. Does the artist seek total occultation? The visible world reappears under abstract brush and scissors, outlined in the work of the hand that would deny it. As Leonardo da Vinci led us to understand, Form is everywhere. It emerges and pulsates where no one has placed it: in humidity stains and mold growing on a wall, in a dissipating cloud, in an ember that burns itself up, at once Phoenix and Legion. If the eye discovers forms in pure matter—earth, air, water, fire—how can man prevent matter from taking form when he works? We may try to flee from nature, but it is part of our being. Evoked by unintentional analogies, recognized under camouflages consciously laid by the artist or rendered by symbolic figures buried in the depths of his sensitivity that emerge in the signs composing the work, nature comes forth in all its innumerable manifestations that somehow have always escaped the artist: in the strange textures of fragmented forms, in the revelations of microscopes and telescopes that penetrate ever deeper into the abysses of the atom or of the cosmos, but also in the most ordinary sights. What admirable abstract art is prefigured—to cite but one example—in the masterpieces of peeling bark seen, in infinite variations, on the

⁴ In this way Marcel Brion demonstrated the rigid construction of paintings by Paolo Uccello and Piero della Francesca as an underlying abstraction, pre-figuring the overt abstraction of Kandinsky and Hartung.

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trunks of a eucalyptus or a banana tree. The human mind is steeped in the vocabulary of these natural forms and refers to them even when it least wants to.

But must figurative realities uncovered in a so-called abstract work remain strictly without significance? Under pain of otherwise appearing old-fashioned, must we ignore them, in the manner that the true music connoisseur would be, according to Valéry, the person to whom music suggests nothing? Was it purely fortuitous that Debussy employed titles such as *Footsteps in the Snow*, *The Hills of Anacapri* or *The Sunken Cathedral*? That Ravel composed *Oiseaux tristes*, Messiaen *Le Cycle des corps glorieux*, and Georges Mathieu *Les Capétiens partout*, *Petite fête pour Iris*, *Hommage à Couperin*?

Even if this were totally true, the fact is that in these pieces, or in those known only by a number—a chorale by Bach or by César Franck, a Chopin prelude—the listener who would limit himself to an austere reception of signs without meaning, finding his full enjoyment as “connoisseur” in an act of computation, of consideration and contemplation of spatial relationships and measures of time, of alterations of relationships, conjunctions, accidents and combinations forming the development of a melodic line or the organization of an orchestral unit, such a listener would no doubt miss the essential message. A musical composition is not a purely abstract sculpture in perpetual movement, nor an abstract plastic work, the graphic translation of internal musicality as disembodied as mathematics. Internal musicality, like that of audible sounds, is the expression of a psychic world. Every work is first of all—and its author cannot prevent this—a discourse on the author himself, on the fundamental tonality of his being, on his attitude toward life, on the movement, the rhythms and the intensity of his destiny day by day. The discourse can, naturally, be rigged, but such rigging is itself significant. Man always dissembles his confessions more than we imagine and more than he himself imagines. In sum, like the figurative painter, the abstract painter cannot avoid the “subject.” Through a conscious expression of an interior landscape or through a revelation of sub-consciousness, a painting confesses the mind from which it emanated. Ultimately it can signify insignificance. Figurative art itself, through the filter of the subject, has always let the artist’s mind appear. *A fortiori* this is so for the

abstract work that refuses the distractions of an anecdotal subject and opens directly onto the psyche of its creator. However, this psyche is immersed in the natural and social environment that has enriched him. It is in relation to this environment (and not in relation to nothing) that the signs he emits find their meaning. According to its colors and forms, following a symbolism rooted in the exchange of the artist and his audience with their environment, such a painting inescapably translates a luminous asceticism, the exaltation of being, the joy of an alleluia; or else it suggests anguish, an internal conflict, a *De profundis* revealing the closing in of a being on itself, the refusal of all aid, a tryst with nothingness.

Abstract art has suffered from having been identified in the minds of many, with the great operation of derision which, since Duchamp's ready-mades, has been highlighted by the showing of canned excrement, single color paintings and lacerated bare canvases; but abstract art is, for the most part, illustrated by creations of true seekers of beauty.

Yet abstract art assuredly runs a great risk of meaning nothing more than its author. Apart from those works in which a strong temperament is expressed, others with less than nothing to say fuse together in a nebulous, anonymous blend.

But is "rubbish" any less prevalent in figuration? How many "paintings" and sculptures evoke nature with no more art than 19th century chromos?⁵ How many are there that do not make contact—whether the work be abstract or figurative, without there being something that delights or dismays, disturbs or questions,

⁵ "Nor less so!", some genie (good or bad?) may challenge me, taking up the apology for the chromo, the only supposedly "artistic" images that at that time crossed the thresholds of most homes, bringing with them new visions into unchanging horizons. And the role of "passageway" is in fact the vocation of a work of art. But for there to be communication over the passageway, someone has to move, one way or another. If the audience is sterile, the work is useless. If the work is devoid of any message... but who can ever swear that a work is devoid of any message? It may be that the person encountering a work discovers in it what he has within himself and what he brings to it. Maybe for certain persons imprisoned by their existence at that time, chromos conjured up suddenly liberating visions, and who knows how far an excited imagination might go? Today and always perhaps there is no work of any kind—figurative or abstract—that is a chromo without any potential.

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without the mystery of emotion that, as a poet has said, makes visible “what man thought he saw.”

To do this the functional mode of the abstract artist is no different from that of the figurative artist, even though his techniques allow accelerations or modalities that call more systematically for chance contributions. The method cannot totally exclude a dialectical alternation—that can be infinitely modulated—between instinctive force and control, between imagination and craftsmanship.

Only this alternation allows the work of art to bear the stamp of its author in its innermost fiber, to be incontestably from him and him alone, like a fingerprint. This is the essential point: not that the signs created do or do not refer to external nature, but that they constitute a handwriting that refers, in and of itself, only to the being from which it emanates, or at least a handwriting containing something that is proper only to this being, a handwriting that becomes coherent across the diversity of works by being distinguishable at first glance from the handwriting of everyone else. This presence of the artist in his works is the source of that special emotion the works can inspire in us. In the presence of such emotion felt before an abstract work, all discussion of the basic legitimacy of such art is vain.

In this emotion resides the art itself, that which distinguishes an artist from an artisan. Even though we have not always been aware of it, the plastic arts from all times have had as their primary function not simply to copy the visible world but, practically through the pretext of their subject, whatever it may be, to move us by interesting us in something else, by placing us in contact with something else. Every true work, even a portrait, has never been art other than by going beyond representation and pure resemblance. In a manner proper to each artist, the work introduces in us, more or less surreptitiously, what the Chinese call the vital force, cosmic energy, “resonance of the spirit.” We will come back to this.

III. ABSTRACT ART AND FIGURATIVE ART: A SINGLE DESTINY.

Who, in reality, is “us”? How are the works created by artists really received? It seems to me that we can distinguish three cases,

depending on whether the work touches a person with a true artistic education, or someone with a predominantly intellectual education, or someone with an apparently summary education, essentially self-taught.

In the first case the mind has long been in contact with the works themselves; it is sensitive to their particular language. It is, as much as can be, autonomous in its emotions and in eventual conceptualizations regarding them.

In the second case—and this is the case of the great majority of people in developed countries today—learning is primarily verbal, bookish and discursive. That which remains in art is what can be formulated in ideas. Even in circles where people claim to have a well-rounded education, many of our contemporaries (because of overly specialized studies, absorbing professional obligations and multiple leisure activities) have not devoted the time necessary to art. Many people, with regard to art, are concerned with how they may appear and have built up a sort of serial education, hammered together with no personal foundations for forming judgments. Afraid of passing for philistines, they fall in line willingly with the pedants and their system, who impress them with their self-assurance and their clever juggling of ideas, usually drawn from an *a priori* argument, either modernist or traditionalist. These sectarian pedants, solemn defenders of the past, guardians of eternal canons, or contentious magistrates of an obsolete avant-garde, all conduct themselves in the realm of artistic taste like salesmen for a chain of ready-to-wear clothing, whose outlets are legion in offices, museums and sophisticated drawing-rooms. But, as we said at the beginning of these remarks, in art the doctrinaires have no legitimate authority; they do not belong in this land. Their discourse and their commentaries—whether they be “experts,” historians or sociologists—have no more incidence on the expression of true creators than on profound artistic evolution. Genius is always ahead of concepts; the candor of an authentic artist is of greater importance than any criticism.

This is why certain people with a rather limited education, often self-taught, who have retained a freshness in their sensitivity (perhaps at the cost of some modesty), good sense and simplicity of heart, have an approach to art that is much more similar to that of persons with a true artistic education than to persons imbued

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with intellectual pretensions. They are moved by signs pointing to transcendence of themselves, an almost indeterminate handwriting, with a strange vibration, in contact with an unknown beyond what is there to see or to hear. This causes an indefinable pleasure, like a caress to the soul, which satisfies them. And this, in fact, is sufficient to conclude that here there is art. For there to be art, it is necessary and it suffices that a work laden with destiny (pictorial, sculptural, musical, etc.) provide us with a quiver or a rumor from the world beyond. Thus the work contains an invisible element, linked to its visible element. And this invisible element appears neither more nor less in abstract than in figurative art. No figurative school, at any time, has the monopoly on this. Everything else is artificial.⁶

There are no forms—figurative or abstract—that in themselves are today decadent, moribund, outmoded or promising for the future. All forms at every moment are for everyone, the same for everyone, even if some can place them better than others. What is different—whether they be figurative or abstract—is the spirit animating them. It is this spirit that is withered or vital, that drowns in automatic repetition or that appeals, in an existential flow, with all its ardor and its lucidity to an organization of forms,

⁶ This is what people of all tendencies have felt and expressed in a thousand different ways. Bossuet: “There is so much art in nature that art itself consists in nothing other than understanding nature well.” Anatole France: “The artist should love life and show us that it is beautiful.” Manet: “Art should be the writing of life.” Marcel Jouhandeau: “Art... adds to life just what it lacked for being truer than itself.” Edmond Jaloux: “The work of art has a mystic mission that is to redeem the real.” Alain: “All the arts are like mirrors in which man knows and recognizes something about himself of which he was unaware.” Elsa Triolet: “Art... gives new possibilities for the conception of the universe.” Paul Valéry: “What we call ‘a work of art’ is the result of an action whose *finite* purpose is to provoke *infinite* developments in some persons.” Georges Mathieu: “A work of art begins from the moment when a fragment of the world becomes itself a world.” Jacques Despiere: “The alchemist sought to transcend what nature gave him. He gathered the morning dew, a natural element, and then he transmuted it and transfigured it. He forced it to undergo monstrous forms, at the end of which this morning dew became alchemical dew, which is both the symbol of love and the symbol of gold. Artistic creation, a most mysterious phenomenon, can be compared to these ancient practices of the alchemists.” Gromaire: “The substance of things must be relentlessly sought... To take an apple as a starting point and to end up with a moving plastic entity is a highly spiritual act.” Bernanos: “Art has a purpose other than itself... its perpetual search for Being.” Claudel: “Poetry is an art. (...) The task of poetry is to find God in all things and to make them assimilable.” Carlyle: “Eternity looks at us across time.”

a handwriting capable of introducing some fragment of new life into the world.

At times the death of art is proclaimed. This seems hardly likely to me, but we should be clear about what we mean. There will always be artists, for the need to create makes itself felt in certain sensitive individuals and apparently it cannot fail to continue making itself felt as long as human beings exist—and whatever may be the cost of having this vocation. However, will the world continue to receive art? The official protection now given to the arts in every country in the world, and even by international organizations, creates a rather disturbing situation. This is what is done for endangered species. For thousands of years art was inseparable from society. It was one with beings and with things, with moments and monuments, with the rituals and the rhythms of the group, whose knowledge and beliefs it expressed. This is evident in the art of Gothic cathedrals or Hindu temples, just as it had been in Paleolithic art or Egyptian art, as it was in Mayan art, and so on. Then, under the growing influences of “enlightened” rationality, artistic activities, like spiritual activities, were shunted to the margins. The tendency was to seek in a work of art nothing more than ornament and decoration, an eloquent surface—a representation of the visible world or of abstract relationships. The artist, devalued, sensed with confusion the compensating need to consecrate his work. In this fragment cut off from the social context, more or less consciously, he sought the All, like a fortune-teller with a crystal ball. Or else, in scribbling revolt, he has risen up against the concept of a work of art, in various manners. But as long as human beings exist, there will also be “art lovers” who seek this mysterious subjacent layer that works of art offer, like oxygen, to souls altered in their essence. Except that art lovers will become rare for as long as social development relegates art, mentally and even physically, to “special preserves”. There art leads a handicapped life, scorned or mindlessly glorified.

Instead of the death of art, sometimes we hear that art will be totally transformed by the pressures of rampant technological developments. This prophecy is not new, but nowhere does even the beginning of an actualization of it appear. It is a strange view of things, a confusing of the accidental with the substantial. There have been, and there will certainly be, surface phenomena: hitherto

unknown artistic techniques or the appearance of new schools. But in relation to the whole of art, as it has existed since prehistoric times, nothing fundamental has been, or will be, thrown into doubt. Otherwise, if we look at the immense progress in technology since the cavemen of Lascaux, how can we understand why there has not been, over these tens of thousands of years, practically nothing substantially new in the art of painting, engraving and sculpture?

The principal question for the future of art is, instead, this one: will we find a congruent approach to works of art? Will we come to them with a purified sensitivity making them more accessible to us in their very essence? Will we once again, going against the “slag of knowledge”,⁷ become capable of understanding their ingenuousness and the refreshment they offer us? Will we overcome the harmful habits of an excessively compartmentalized intellectual life, overintellectualized so that we are no longer capable of understanding the signs artists propose to us?

In this respect the fate of abstract art is inseparable from that of figurative art. When Georges Mathieu compels himself, for reasons of rapidity, to an absence of premeditation “in order to allow unknown signifiers to rise up inside,”⁸ when he wants them to achieve expression without any precedents, he is protecting himself against the appearance of popularized significations. In the simultaneous appearance of the signifying and the signified, he is desperately seeking the glow of the first morning light over the earth. But every artist of genius has this Promethean ambition, which constitutes his very legitimacy. Every authentic artist reveals a part of creation with original grace. Like a man of science with an invention, like a thinker with a new philosophy, the artist brings to light a potentiality that until then had been in limbo. He traces the signs that had remained waiting for expression in the unexplored depths of the universe. Or else, in and through his handwriting, he purges all things and makes them new. Whether it be a landscape of the soul or a natural landscape, the principle of this operation remains exactly the same. True art, the only art that matters, brings the unseen to life. No one had ever before imagined

⁷ “Les scories du savoir”; Georges Mathieu: *L'Abstraction prophétique*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

the *Rouen Cathedral* as on a Monet canvas or Hokusai's *The Wave*, and no one will ever be able to imagine them like this again, as unique as Mathieu's signature. The work of art has this lustral power that cuts the sign off from all that preceded and makes it contemporary with the creation of the world. That "the sign precedes its meaning"⁹ is not a privilege of lyric abstraction. No sign has artistic validity if it does not precede its meaning, if it is not pure of all prior usage, that is of all wear, if it is not traced by its author with a virginity immediately offered to all. No matter what battle scene, family portrait, still life or non-subject may be the pretext for a painting, an infinity of signs were available to represent it. If the author is a true artist, no one else would have made the same painting with the same pretext. The personal something that he had to say appears over and beyond the battle scene, the family portrait, the still life or the non-subject he has signified. This element appears in the work precisely because the signs he created were not those that could be expected *a priori* because they were *without precedent*, borne by the uniqueness of his handwriting. Even if all authentic artists were to oblige themselves to tell the same story, this story would have as many unique versions as there were artists. In each work a different light would appear. Through these innumerable original visions, we move towards an ever richer vision of the real. No one vision is truer than any other; all of them give us a part of that inexhaustible beauty that, in its total truth, lies beyond.

The two complementary effects of every plastic work—figuration and abstraction—for a long time co-existed without their being distinguished. Then they suddenly pretended to divorce, with a sort of fury in which each refused to recognize that the other is essential to it. Now comes the new age in which each accepts the other; living together deliberately can now open new perspectives. With a clearer awareness and a more profound desire to express the drama of existence in its very kernel, there arises an art of integration, in many diverse forms, hoping to furnish in the work the double presence of the external world and internal space, endlessly facing erratic questions arising from the great fundamental interrogation: "Where did man, so infinitesimal in the

⁹ *Ibid.*

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cosmos, come from? Where is he going? And why?" Schools, like hard and firm definitions, are mated and debased to produce new fruitfulness. Vanity of ideas and supremacy of life: this is the strength of art.

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