

## Art as the Performance of the Unconscious Schemata of Philosophy: The Time Capsule Project

Philosophy records many ways in which it attempts to overcome its own limitations, especially those connected with its attachment to 'representation'. Might we not need to move outside of philosophy, to art, to complete the philosophical project? The time capsule project is conceived in these terms.

But first, a review of various ways in which philosophy has already tried to overcome its own limits.<sup>1</sup>

- a. *Phenomenology* – which attempts to renew our responsibility (leads to Levinas and Derrida)
- b. *Performativity* – Plato (Socrates), Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Barthes, speech act theory, in which philosophy moves from understanding itself to be merely about something to helping to bring that about.
- c. *Wittgenstein and pragmatism*: critique of representational knowledge in favor of focus on practices.
- d. *Transformation* – Marx, Deleuze, Derrida. Marx – “Philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways, the point however is to change it.” For Deleuze, the specific task of philosophy is the creation of concepts, in the battle against State philosophy, the power of closure etc. Derrida’s deconstruction is a form of oblique transformation, working on and with the language in which it expresses itself.
- e. *Thinking with Heidegger*. (See *What is Called Thinking?*, *Contributions to Philosophy*, “Conversations on a Country Path”.) Heidegger distinguishes meditative from calculative thinking, and sometimes metaphysics and philosophy from thinking as such.

In each case, philosophy sees itself as having reached a certain limit and tries to reconstitute itself so as to overcome the obstacle. It could be said that in each case, what philosophy runs up against is the problem of representation. This is undoubtedly not just one problem, as that phrase suggests, but a cluster. Thus, there is the problem that in taking its job to be that of stating the truth, capturing it in propositions, it may be presupposing something about the efficacy of such a descriptive stance. If philosophy cares about making truth happen, should it not go beyond description? And yet the danger then, is that it may sacrifice truth for effectiveness, as Socrates charged the Sophists. And even Hegel warned against philosophy wanting to be edifying. The problem is a bit like the government and the intelligence services. Once the government tells the intelligence services what it wants to hear, it loses a grip on the truth. It is also problematic to restrict the function of language itself to representation, when it does so many other things. And it is naive to suppose that representation itself is somehow neutral, when we know perfectly well that the concepts with which we choose to describe things sets the stage for both further reflection and action. There is also a strong sense that the goal of representation is often precisely bound up with establishing a dominant discourse that will serve the interests of the status quo, and blind us to the possibility of alternatives. (See here attacks on grand narrative.) Finally, we may say, there is a

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Philosophy at the Limit*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1990

tendency, at least for representational philosophy to focus on the level of the concept, and to be relatively blind to what precedes, and perhaps supercedes it – let us say, in brief, intuition and singularity, at one end, and the event, disruption and transformation at the other. It is not only Plato, Kant and Hegel who think of intuition as superceded by the concept. And the same desire expresses itself in those who would treat any level beyond conceptuality as having its telos in some sort of higher order. And yet philosophy, or some variant of this discipline, may well wonder whether this teleological machine does not strangely betray certain possibilities – possibilities to which other modes of human engagement so powerfully attest. Here of course, it is possible to respond: “But philosophy just is a distinctive disciplined thinking. No-one would flout mathematics for forgetting to use fingers when counting, or for discounting the fact that  $3+3$  can apply to oranges.” At the beginning of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, for example, he starts with the indexicals ‘here’ and ‘now’ only to move on from there by extracting the minimal universality to be found even there. Who could ‘think’ this particular ‘here’ or ‘now’, or this ‘I’. Is it not precisely the task of thinking to move on, to generalize etc. And sensuous intuition – surely it can only provide us with a jumping-off point for a knowledge in which it is subordinated to concepts that precisely sublimate or encompass intuitions? Beyond concepts, we find interruptions of our conceptual schemes, the march or the shock of history. But it is not uncommon to see these interruptions merely as events that deliver us from one order to another rather than as revealing to us at least part of the character of the real.

In all these ways, we may say philosophy has been challenged. As we have said, it may respond to such a challenge by drawing back and reaffirming its limits and specificity. Or it may attempt in one way or another to address this question of limits either by breaking through these limits, or by pointing beyond them to the importance of what is there, or by thematizing the whole question of limits. In many ways, deconstruction has done this. In the simplest early version, Derrida spoke about the need for a double strategy, of working within the limits and moving ‘outside’ at the same time, and that it did not make sense to choose between these strategies.

If these various ways in which philosophy has run up against its own limits are tied up with representation, it raises the question as to whether philosophy might not engage more productively with art, and with its own thinking through these problems.

Much of 20<sup>th</sup> C art has itself been toying with the limits of representation, and specifically with what we could call the vehicle of representation – the frame, and the organizing schemas with which it works.

The value of drawing on art here, and specifically on the ways in which art has struggled with its own limits and possibilities, is obviously dependent on what we take to be the point of philosophy, so perhaps I should come clean about that before we go any further. As I understand it, philosophy comes into its own precisely when it discovers contradictions, limits, boundaries, difficulties – often not of its own making. Some of these are ‘natural’ conditions (such as the spatial boundaries of bodies, and their mortality). Others are the artefacts of social practices, including philosophy itself (such as

the question of rights, justice, God, the soul etc.). Sometimes, philosophy can make helpful distinctions, through which artificial problems are dissolved if we can bear these distinctions in mind. But more often, philosophy can teach us what I would call a liminal fluency, or aporetic agility – the ability to deal productively/creatively with boundary problems. Part of what this involves is dramatizing, exposing the way boundaries operate in such a way as to make thinking possible, as well as problematizing it. (Think of dualism, for example.)

In the light of this, I want to suggest a particular area in which philosophy and art might be thought to have the most to offer each other. I have in mind the schemata with which philosophy operates, often unconsciously, the ways in which it works with shapes of space and time, shapes which we can explore, perform and highlight reflexively more easily than we can resolve or decide on. If art deals with these schemata more specifically, then we may well be able to learn from it.

What I mean by schemata are ways in which oppositions like inside/outside, before/after, original/image, part/whole, one/many, identity/difference and appearance/reality operate. We can, of course, find fault with these oppositions as such. But to the extent that we cannot think at all without working with and through them, it becomes more important to learn how to make them our friends rather than our captors.

If, as Derrida suggests, (and we might think of Socratic dialogue as a forerunner in this), philosophical responsibility consists in going through the undecidable, any sense that art *performed* the undecidable would make it very valuable to us.

And we might well find that the ways in which people inhabit these schemata captures what Heidegger talks about when he speaks of going to the other's encounter.

Is art about the art-object, or more concerned with bringing us a way of seeing, to use John Berger's phrase? Which could expose, and mobilize limits, and open up possibilities of transformation. [Hence the importance of art for politics.]

Certain kinds of philosophy can incite thinking by facilitating an active self-consciousness about the shapes we deploy and ways in which we can rely on them and rework them. Marking the limit, the point at which a writer gives himself to his language and its logic, is a central motif to deconstruction. This explains in part why Derrida has had such an influence outside philosophy. It also explains something of the hostility he has received, because the mobilizing of schemata (cf. "shaking the value of presence" in *Of Grammatology*) cuts against the direct productive employment of these schemata. Perhaps one reason Deleuze has little time for argument is that it is all too often just rehearsing the implications of these schemata.

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## My project

I do not know whether burying a time-capsule in which items are gathered together around a theme and drawn together by a narrative is a work of art. Perhaps it is if we allow conceptual art to be art. Or perhaps it is best to explore this question and then to leave it open precisely to allow it to stay alive for us. What is certainly intended is a certain ritualized exploration of a primitive temporal schema – that of the Now.

If the animation of boundaries is the common property of philosophy and art, we might go on to say that philosophy principally does this symbolically (via words, concepts, schemes) while visual art does this through images, intuition etc. Obviously this very boundary needs breaking down.

The boundary between symbol and image is both important and yet not precise. It is true, philosophy has typically concerned itself with the subordination of the senses, and Kant went out of his way to purge his first Critique of all the examples he had originally thought to provide, in a secular version of the spirit in which Loyola had struggled to eliminate every sensuous image that could distract his will. And there have been painters for whom the sensuousness of paint and color was central. But rather than pretend that there could be a pure thought or a pure art that occupied these poles, we could perhaps try to define art and philosophy in terms of their respectively subordination of concept to image and v.v.

However, there is an intermediary zone, which we could call the realm of schematization – the play of space and time – that seems indispensable to both (and is perhaps heightened in music and in architecture). Kant distinguishes space and time as the forms of intuition from the 12 categories (fundamental concepts). We need to acknowledge that these forms are structurally generative, and that this whole dimension is deeply bound up with our being-in-the-world, as Heidegger puts it.

If we then distinguish topology from temporality, we can plot different modes of transcendence as opening up opportunities for animating boundaries:

- \* religious
- \* erotic
- \* dialogue
- \* reading another thinker (Heidegger)
- \* art

As for performing temporality, we can think of:

Literature: Woolf, Joyce, Calvino, Beckett  
Philosophy: Socrates, Hegel, Heidegger

Art: see Lyotard on Barnett Newman<sup>2</sup>, See Sallis on Monet. See Goldsworthy's *Rivers and Tides*.

Art can represent, perform, capture death, transitoriness, becoming, presence, tragedy ...  
Visual art captures time in a static form:

Caravaggio: images of the skull (in his St Jerome) – one of the three symbols of vanitas.  
Van Gogh, (after Millet), *The Sower*, images of creativity, everydayness (Cezanne),  
triumph over death (religious paintings of the crucifixion), the instant (Newman,  
Hockney's "Splash", narrative painting (Grant Wood, Edward Hopper, Middle Ages e.g.  
*Journey of the True Cross*)

An art event attempts a certain intensification through participation of the experience of  
this animation of boundaries. (Cf. religious ritual, where boundary exceeding  
relationships are invoked – e.g. between man and God).

We could say that religious ritual tends to aim at a unifying confirmation of a certain  
structure of dependence, while these art-events are creative-explorations of the multi-  
layeredness of experience. That is, they both draw attention to what is there, and they  
create scenes and monuments that make a specific contribution to renewing, enhancing  
and multiplying these relationships.

This art-event is one of a series, and as such already raises the question of identity and  
repetition. See Kierkegaard v. Plato: repetition as intensifying reenactment.

Of course, repetition is both the source of delight and concern to each of us – from  
boredom (empty repetition) to affirmation of the moment (see Nietzsche's account of the  
eternal return).

Why a time-capsule? What does this mean? In one sense *every* work of art is a time-  
capsule. If it is valued, it is preserved to give joy to future generations. But much is just  
lost and destroyed. My time-capsules operate at many temporal levels.

1. The coming together of a virtual community of participants across the world, drawn  
together at a particular time, utterly unrepeatable;
2. The various imaginary projections of the future into which this capsule will be sent,  
and the impact of these projections on the ways we carry on now.

If you suppose e.g. that these capsules might protect their contents for thousands of years,  
they might be discovered by beings no longer human, or evolved versions of us, or even  
what we might think of as aliens. Such a capsule might well contain items, and certainly

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<sup>2</sup> See his essay Newman: The Instant in *The Inhuman*, p, 78ff . A distinction should be made between the  
time it takes the painter to paint the picture (time of 'production'), the time required to look at and  
understand the work (time of 'consumption'), the time to which the work refers (a moment, a scene, a  
situation, a sequence of events: the time of the dialogic referent, of the story told by the picture), the time it  
takes to reach the viewer once it has been 'created' (the time of circulation) and finally, perhaps, the time  
the painting *is*. This principle ... should allow us to isolate different "sites of time". [For Newman, "time is  
the picture itself"]

collections of items nowhere else known. Each of these thoughts provokes a reflection on the here and now. If we imagine very different beings discovering this, who are we? And if they struggle to interpret these items, does that not allow us to look again? Projecting the future allows an imaginative displacement of the present.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Smithson invented the distinction and the interplay between site and non-site, where the non-site would be typically a gallery presenting the site in photographs and text. We are developing that idea, with the second site a website, leaving open the question of whether second site is also a second sight, and whether that is an improvement or what. Note these two sites are also quite different times, or ways of inhabiting, and inhibiting time, each of them tied up with death and the displacement of the body.