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No Abstract

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Rereading Coomaraswamy

RICHARD M. CARP

ANANDA K. Coomaraswamy, curator of Indian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Art, was a revolutionary figure in Oriental, especially Indian, art history. He was also a philosopher of substantial power who articulated a set of notions about art that ran counter to the prevailing modernisms of his day. Our own time, engaged in reevaluating modernisms, may be better able to appreciate and benefit from his ideas. In this paper I will consider those ideas as they are set out in a small book, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, first published in 1943 under the title *Why Exhibit Works of Art?*, and consisting of nine lectures and essays originally published separately.

There are irritating flaws in Coomaraswamy's concepts and presentation. He has the diction of a British schoolmaster, and the reader tends to resent being talked down to in a condescending and patriarchal manner. He is also a resolute medievalist and seems to believe that for most people life in a Medieval European or traditional Indian village was happy and fulfilling. The fundamental issues at stake in his philosophy, however, in no way depend either on patriarchy or medievalism. A more important issue is his apparent platonism; but, as we shall see, his philosophy is amenable to a processual reading that identifies truth with a continuously relational response to the flow of events rather than with eternally fixed ideas.

All human action, according to Coomaraswamy, involves both power/knowledge and will. Art is a matter of power/knowledge, while ethics concerns the will. We do not make

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"art," but artifacts, for "the art remains in the artist and is the knowledge by which things are made" (1956, p. 18).[1] Because all things are made by art, "there can be no good use, that is effective use, without art" (p. 83). "Beauty . . . is the attractive power of perfection" (p. 28). Each thing is beautiful in its own kind; its beauty must be judged according to the fullness with which it realizes that kind.

> Just as we cannot say that a frog is any more or less beautiful than a man, whatever our preferences may be, so we cannot possibly say that a telephone booth as such is any more or less beautiful than a cathedral as such. (p. 76)

> [So] The artist as such is an amoral type. (p. 83)

> there can be no moral judgement of art itself, since it is not an act but a kind of knowledge or power by which things can be well made, whether for good or evil use: the art by which utilities are produced cannot be judged morally, because it is not a kind of willing but a kind of knowing. (p. 28)

Although art and ethics can be distinguished analytically, existentially such a separation amounts to what Coomaraswamy calls "a disintegration of personality" (p. 83). As a human being, the artist is "responsible for all that his will consents to" (p. 83). Human actions are therefore subject to two correlated judgements–the judgement of beauty and the judgement of prudence. Art, as art, has no ethical dimension. An atomic bomb, or a telephone booth, can be as beautiful, as artful, as a painting or a chapel.

> There is no distinction in principle of orator from carpenter, but only a distinction of things well and truly made from things not so made and of what is beautiful from what is ugly in terms of formality and informality. . . . "Noble" is an ethical value, and pertains to the a priori

> censorship of what ought or ought not to be made at all. The judgement of works of art from this point of view is not merely legitimate, but essential to a good life and the welfare of humanity. But it is not a judgement of the work of art as such. The bomb, for example, is only bad as a work of art if it fails to destroy and kill to the required extent. (p. 27)

At the same time, because art is required for any human action, artists are not special people; every person is a special kind of artist, with the power/knowledge to effect actions (p. 24). "Everyone is naturally a doer, patron and consumer; and at the same time an artist, that is to say a maker by art, in some specialized sense" (p. 67), except, perhaps, the "mere idler and parasite" (p. 98). This means that, for Coomaraswamy, judgements we usually reserve for "works of art" are applicable to all elements of culture. The judgements of art and prudence are universally applicable, so that "all possessions that are not at the same time beautiful and useful are an affront to human dignity" (p. 49).

What, then, is the use of those artifacts we are accustomed to calling "art" in the narrower sense of the term: works of fine art, architecture and design? Until we know this, we cannot question them with respect to their ethical dimension, for ethics, posing the question of prudence, asks whether the thing done is worth doing, as the question of art asks whether it is done well.

Perhaps, Coomaraswamy ponders, works of art that do not serve the body's needs may still "serve those of our soul, or if you prefer the word, our reason. . . . as the Upanishad reminds us, 'one comes to be of just such stuff as that on which the mind is set'" (p. 10).

> If [a non-utilitarian artifact] is not about something, and not for anything, it has no use. And furthermore, unless it is about something Worth while . . . to the patron and consumer as well as to the artist and maker, it has no real use. (p. 90)

The purpose of non-utilitarian artifacts is to fix the mind. Of course, many utilitarian artifacts perform this function, too; a fact that is more openly appreciated in other cultures, but remains true in ours as well.[2] Since we become like what the mind is fixed on, art is prudent which fixes the mind on what it is good to become. This view is coherent with that expressed by many artists about their work:

> Robert Motherwell wrote "one's art is just one's effort to wed oneself to the universe, to unify oneself through union." Max Beckman claimed, "Art is creative for the sake of realization, not for amusement; for transfiguration, not for the sake of play." (Carp, in press)

Coomaraswamy notes repeatedly that artmaking is a rite, an act intrinsic to the transformation of the maker (see, for example, pp. 39 and 80). Yet, he sees art as more than a yogic act of personal enlightenment. Although Motherwell and Beckman may seem, at first, to view art in this way, the public dimensions of their activities belie this. In showing their work, they demonstrate their desire to unify and transfigure more than just themselves.

This rhetoric is common among contemporary artists. Robert Morris seeks work that "extends presentness as a conscious experience" (1978, p. 80). Artist Robert Irwin, in 1982, said:

> when I walk down the street I no longer, at least to the same degree, bring the world into focus in the same way. My whole visual structure is changed by the fact that I'm now using an entirely different process of going at it. So the implications of that kind of art are very rash–I mean, in time they have the ability to change every single thing in the culture itself. (cited in Wechsler, 1982b, p. 102)

According to architect Christopher Alexander:

> When you build a thing you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but must also repair the world around

> it, and within it so that the larger world at that one place becomes more coherent, and more whole. (see Alexander, Ishikawa, & Silverstein, 1977, p. xiii)

> Of course [such a] thing is physically different, but it is also psychically quite different. It's completely different to live in such a place. It causes genuine political and emotional change. (Alexander, cited in Grabow, 1983, p. 159)

An individual artwork may have limited power to fix the mind. It probably does preoccupy the artist during its creation and it may support the contemplation of its owner or those who see it in a gallery or museum, but its scope is limited. Art, however, goes beyond individual artifacts; it is the material imagination that permeates the cultural landscape. As such, it plays a profound role in the processes by which perception is constructed, maintained and transformed (see Carp, in press).

"In large part perception is learned in infancy through interaction with the child's built environment (the cultural landscape)" (Carp, 1989, p. 69). The body may be considered the first artifact of material culture, imagined, created and received by each person in the activity of growing up. Habituated body rhythms, body postures and characteristic physical tensions are culturally learned, embedded in our bodies and lost from direct experience.

> "Each culture," says anthropologist E.T. Hall, "has its own characteristic manner of locomotion, sitting, standing, reclining and gesturing." We learn the kinesics of our culture and habituate them, forgotten deep in our bodies, where even our characteristic rhythms are artifacts of cultural learning. (Carp, 1989, p. 70)

Cultural learning permeates our perception of the apparently external world as well, for internal and external appear in mutual relationship in the act of perception. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) showed, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, "every external

perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body" (p. 206). "External perception and the perception of one's own body vary in conjunction because they are two facets of one and the same act" (p. 205). As Ittelson and Kilpatrick (1973) have shown, "Object and percept are part and parcel of the same thing" (p. 174).

Even our direct temporal and spatial experience are culturally learned. E.T. Hall (1969) writes:

> When Westerners think and talk about space, they mean the distance between objects. In the West, we are taught to perceive and to react to the arrangements of objects and to think of space as "empty." The meaning of this becomes clear only when it is contrasted with the Japanese, who are trained to give *meaning* to spaces–to perceive the shape and arrangement of spaces; for this they have a word, *ma*. The *ma*, or interval, is a basic building block in all Japanese spatial experience. (p. 153)

Perception is not a registration of a world which exists apart from the perceptual acts in which it appears. It is a constructive act in which the person forms the world which appears, including the ways in which the person appears in that world. Like most human acts, world-construction is learned in infancy from cultural sources. It differs profoundly in individuals from different cultures, who literally "inhabit different sensory worlds." Perception is a tradition, handed down from generation to generation and varying from one culture to another and from historical period to historical period within one culture.

> For example, history has not yet fully told the story of the early development of science in the West. Western science is, of course, based on the mathematicization of the physical world. The spatial continuum was first subjected to uniform mathematical analysis in the vanishing point perspective paintings of the Renaissance. Through the application of this mathematical analysis, painters could create the experience of a seemingly consistent and

rational perceptual space. Soon this abstract spatial construction was applied to the design of city squares, then to private estates, and then to the organization of larger and larger units of design. Alberti provided the mathematics for painters in 1435; nearly two centuries later Newton, Leibniz and Descartes completed the analytical mathematicization of space in the calculus. They lived in a cultural landscape permeated with the (no longer new) space invented and created in Renaissance painting.

Renaissance painting opened a new distance between viewer and what is represented in the painting through the convention of the "window." This distance is rewritten in landscape and urban design in terms of the "view." Without extensive research one can only speculate on the relationship between this new spatial experience and Descartes' division of the world into two discontinuous realms, the "cogitans" (equivalent to the viewer) and the "extensa" (equivalent to the view).

"Renaissance space" and the structures of thought and experience that correlate with it became normative in the structure of experience in the West. Any awareness that this space was constructed eventually vanished and was replaced with a sense that it was "natural" space. As John Russell says in *The Meanings of Modern Art* (1981, p. 31):

> By taking as its first premise a single point of vision, perspective had stabilized a visual experience. It had bestowed order on chaos; it allowed elaborate and systematized cross-referencing, and quite soon it had become a touchstone of coherence and evenmindedness. To "lose all sense of perspective" is to this day a synonym for mental collapse. Yet perspective, before Cezanne, was fundamentally one of the sanctified frauds that keep the world turning: a conspiracy to deceive, in other words.... Cezanne rebuilt the experience of seeing. (Carp, 1989, pp. 71-72)

Thus, art fixes the mind, not merely of individuals, but of cultures, generating fundamental experiences of temporality, spatiality, and personhood. This insight is coming back to us in myriad ways. Edward Hall's ground-breaking anthropological work has demonstrated the great variety of spatial and temporal experiences encoded in varying cultural landscapes. Much of contemporary feminism shows how the representation of women has formed and continues to form women's self-experience (see, for example, the collection of essays in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* [1986], edited by Susan Suleiman, and Margaret Miles's *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* [1989]). In *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions* (1988), Laurence Sullivan provides a brilliant presentation of an entire region, that of indigenous South America, in which material culture is recognized as the fundamental bearer of meaning. Among indigenous South Americans, text, elevated in the West to the *sine qua non* of meaning, is just another form of textile, while the activities of music, weaving, dance and canoe building take the forefront in the self-conscious construction of meaning. In *Darsan*, Diana Eck (1981) shows that the experience of seeing and being seen is phenomenologically and existentially different in the Hindu context than in the contemporary West.

Because of the role of art in cultural processes of perceptual structuring, Coomaraswamy notes that:

> the anthropologist whose interest is in a culture is a better historian of such arts than is the critic whose only interest is in the aesthetic surfaces of the artifacts themselves. (p. 48)[3]

Says Coomaraswamy:

> The current approach may be compared to that of a traveller who, when he finds a signpost, proceeds to

> admire its elegance, to ask who made it, and finally cuts it down and decides to use it as a mantelpiece ornament. (p. 108)

Art matters in the process by which humans become. In expressing this, Coomaraswamy participates in a long tradition of philosophical thought. "To Aristotle, learning is pleasure and the meaningful is the beautiful, not the other way round" (Jones, 1990, p. 37). The purpose of art is meaning, not pleasure. For Coomaraswamy:

> This is not an exclusion of pleasure from life as if pleasure were wrong in itself, it is an exclusion of the pursuit of pleasure thought of as a "diversion," and apart from "life." It is in life itself, in "proper operation" that pleasure arises naturally . . . in the case of the pleasures of use or the understanding of use. (p. 26)

> [that someone] takes pleasure, or may take pleasure, in doing well or in making well, does not suffice to make of this pleasure the purpose of. . . work, except in the case of [one] who is self-righteous or . . . who is merely a self-expressionist: just as the pleasure of eating cannot be called the final end of eating. (p. 96)

We eat to live, we do not live to eat. We work to live, we do not live to work. Art, too, is for life, not life for art. Art fixes the mind, and we become like what the mind is fixed upon. Art is prudent that fixes the mind on what it is good to become.

Either art is real, matters, has meaning, makes, as Gregory Bateson (1979) said, "a difference that makes a difference" or it does not. If it does not, it is a waste of time, mere pleasure without sustenance, like gluttony. If it does, then we need to understand it and respect it. One can go to a contemporary supermarket and buy goods which look like food, smell like food, taste like food, yet provide no nourishment: they are not food; in fact, some of them may actually be harmful. Likewise, one may be able to find artifacts that look, smell and taste like

art, yet are not art. In fact, some of them may actually be harmful. The only alternative to this conclusion is that art is ineffectual and pointless: what cannot be harmful cannot be beneficial.

Ethically practiced fine art and design involve the full exercise of conscience, for:

> art is a conscience about form, precisely as prudence is a conscience about conduct,–a conscience in both senses of the word, i.e., both as rule and as awareness.[4] (Coomaraswamy, p. 70)

But how are we to evaluate the prudence of a work of art and who is to do so? This is a profound and difficult question, but it is no different for works of fine art and design than for any other human activity, all of which are more or less prudent as well as more or less beautiful. We have simply entered the general arena of the ethics of speech and the related arena of epistemology and the nature of truth. As Elizabeth Jones says:

> Art praxis restores meaning, rather than transcends meaning, when it remembers that the intrinsic values of art are the same values underlying the moral and the practical realms. (1990, p. 51)

This conclusion does not rest on a belief in the decidability either of meaning or of ethics. There *is*, as Derrida says, an inescapable, continual supplement, a difference, in human affairs, and the ascription of this *is* asserts the ambiguity involved in the necessity and impossibility of undermining assertion.

> This is the condition both of possibility and of impossibility for any transcendental subjectivity. A decipherable-undecipherable unit or unity. (Derrida, 1981, p. 364)

It seems that Coomaraswamy may believe in a metaphysical certitude that would allow possession of truth in certain human societies. He states that in a unanimous society censorship can

be practiced by an elite class, "whose vocation it is to know metaphysical truth" (p. 85). As with Plato's advocacy of censorship in a perfect society, this can be read two ways: either as an affirmation of the practical desirability of censorship or as an ironic commentary on the necessary imperfection of any possible society. The question is undecidable; what is clear is that the text does not require belief in censorship. Rather, it drives us deeply into inescapable questions of human conduct, society and responsibility. The world is ambiguous, uncertain and consequential. We cannot be sure about the prudence of our actions, but we know that different actions lead in different directions. Only outcomes can tell us what direction is preferable, and each outcome is preliminary. New outcomes may bring strange reversals and overturn previous judgements.

Both undecidability and the inescapability of choosing a course of action are inherent in our situation. The notion of pure relativism, that all actions are equivalent and no action can be chosen as preferable, is both bad faith and intellectual dishonesty. Espousing relativism is choosing one course over another.

> Relativism itself is historical, situational, contextual and constructed. It is not possible not to stand in a tradition, to take up no ethical stance in the world. (Carp, in press)

The notion of "fixing the mind on what it is good to become" is related to that of "telling the truth." In Coomaraswamy we can glimpse a clue to a vision of truth-telling adequate to the uncertain consequentiality of our lives. In the chapter called "Is Art a Superstition or a Way of Life?" he notes that sharpening a blade is called "truing" a knife (p. 74). "Truing" may be a more fruitful concept than "truth," for the human condition is, perhaps, more process than stasis, more verb than noun . When one is skiing down a hill, the overall objective is "balance," but at each moment the specific content required to achieve that objective transforms: "lean a bit to the left," "to the right," "sit back," "speed up," "lean forward and slow down."

The end is not to be confused with the means, nor are those good means which may seem to be good in themselves, but those

which are good in the given application (Coomaraswamy, p. 106). Life is more like a balancing act and less like a pure description of static "essences" remaining unchanged behind a transforming surface. The "ends" of life–joy, fullness, loving and being loved–cannot be reached through any predetermined path. "Good means" to them must be found in each application, moment to moment.

"Thought, knowledge and understanding are mapping activities; through them we develop maps or guides for the conduct of experience" (Carp, in press). We are constantly reminded of Korzybsky's dictum (1958, p. 58) that the map is not the territory. What we may miss is that we are, altogether, map creatures: the territory is only a rumor. My experience of "myself" is not myself any more than my experience of a tree is a tree. At no point can I leave the realm of the map to enter "reality itself." This is the great insight of contemporary deconstructive philosophy. Our experience of our lives occurs on the surface of our maps. In fact, our experience of our lives is not our lives; even this is map-like. Yet, our maps guide us in the conduct of our lives. They are validated, not by their correspondence to the territory (which can never be ascertained), but by outcomes in our lives. To return to the skiing analogy, they are validated by our remaining balanced to the bottom of the slope.

In skiing the goals are self-evident. In life they are not. Art participates in the ongoing public discourse through which we try to ascertain them. The adequacy of our decisions regarding them can only be concluded retrospectively and uncertainly, yet they must be made. In all our actions we strive for that prudence which Coomaraswamy describes as doing what is worth doing.

"Art," says Coomaraswamy, "is the imitation of the nature of things, not of their appearances (p. 19) . . . that is to say, an imitation of nature, not as effect, but as cause" (p. 73). Art-making is truth-telling, and because reality is creative, productive, and processual, the truth it tells is not a copy of things but of creative, productive process–of truing. The ethics of art are the ethics of becoming, of individual and collective self-creation.

Although we can determine it only after the fact, and only tentatively and uncertainly, good art, prudent art, fixes our

minds on what it is good to become.

Notes

1. This raises the possibility of evaluating the artist separately from the artifact. The intent of the artist is relevant to evaluating the artist; it is not relevant in evaluating the artifact.
2. Among the Jivaro-Wuechua, for example, pottery making is coordinated with shamanism and granted equal status because of its spiritual power.
3. A similar point is made by Stephen Melville (1990).
4. 'Form' in the traditional philosophy does not mean tangible shape, but is synonymous with idea and even with soul; the soul, for example, is called the form of the body. If there be a real unity of form and matter, such as we expect in a work of art, the shape of its body will express its form (Coomaraswamy, p. 17).

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