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ST JAMES CAVALIER
CENTRE FOR CREATIVITY



ART IN MALTA TODAY

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WHAT FUTURE FOR ART IN MALTA IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM?

Peter Serracino Inglott

Three remarkable deaths have been prophesied by three of the most highly reputed philosophers of recent centuries. My themes in this brief essay are that the three prognosticized deaths are interconnected and that they have a peculiar relevance to Malta.

First, Hegel in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* which he delivered in Berlin (between 1826 and 1828) prophesied the imminent death of Art.

Then, Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-85) announced the death of God – a dictum that rose to extraordinary popularity in the years following the Second Vatican Council.

Finally, Michel Foucault concluded that Man is a recent invention and destined to an early demise in what has become perhaps the most notorious philosophical utterance of the twentieth century.

Admittedly, it goes against the grain to detract from the paradoxicality of these three aphorisms, but it is an indisputable fact that in each case what the author meant was the end of a certain concept (of Art, of God, of Man) and not of anything which had previously existed anywhere else than in the human mind.

Thus, Hegel (as his best interpreters, e.g. Pierre-Jean Labarriere, have shown) spoke of the end of *schöne Kunst* (Fine Art) meaning Art in the sense which the word had increasingly taken on from the Renaissance onwards – Art as essentially the creative expression of the Self, or in other words, of individual subjectivity.

Descartes (in his very first philosophical essay, the *Compendium, on Music*) had opened the way to the Hegelian position when he had sketched out the idea that Art was the language of the human individual's emotions, as opposed to Science, which was the expression of clear and distinct ideas (as against the vagueness and confusion of feelings) corresponding to the objective world of facts. The "works of art" of which Hegel celebrates the death were also by definition with-

drawn from the ordinary course of everyday life, for instance by being consigned to the cut-off space of a museum, since the lived-in spaces of the world were envisaged as catered for exclusively by Technology, the practical application of Science.

It is not difficult to see that the "god" whose death Nietzsche talks about is also a concept developed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries as the opposite pole to that of Fine Art. God was the projection on a gigantic scale of the Self (a rational mind which was the Cartesian concept of the human essence. Nietzsche's death of "god" (taken to be the absolute personification of rationalism and scientific legalism) is the result of a reactive outburst against the Hegelian ideal of pure rationality which logically implied the death of the emotion-fuelled subjectivity of "Art" as conceived in the post-Cartesian centuries.

Foucault perceived that the roots of both the concept of "Art" as entertained by Hegel and of "God" as entertained by Nietzsche lay in the concept of "Man" as first outlined in Descartes: Man as an individual, atomistic Self, essentially rational and autonomous, but caged in both a material body and a social system that determined the language in which alone his humanity can express itself. Foucault's aphorism is not justified by the late appearance of humankind in the trajectory of evolution and by any expected total destruction of the species in a nuclear holocaust or other similar apocalyptic end of history, but by the late appearance and untenability of the Cartesian dualistic concept of the human being (caricatured by Ryle as the "ghost-in-the-machine").

It is this untenable concept of the human being which accounts for the genesis both of the modern concept of Art and of the modern concept of God, as well as for the contemporary rejection of both.

But if it is only the "Modern" (i.e. Cartesian) concepts which are justifiably rejected, at least two questions remain open: Is there any future for Art in some other sense of the word than the Cartesian? And, secondly, is there any other rela-



tion between Art and God than that of opposite polarities in the same semantic field, as Nietzsche supposed it to be?

The most striking feature of the discourse about Art which began with the Renaissance and continued until our own day is the emphasis on creativity. The artist is seen as a being like God, in that he (or, at the time very rarely, she) creates.

This notion of the artist as creator led to an extraordinary transformation in Medieval times of the image and activity of painters, sculptors, architects, musicians and all those others who began now to be collectively referred to as "artists". (Neither Greek nor Latin has any word which serves the same purpose). It was also to lead, I suspect, to the present crisis.

Before the Renaissance, when theologians (like Abbot Suger of St. Denis who, perhaps more than anyone else expressed the spirit of Medieval European art, or his predecessors like St. Augustine or successors like St. Thomas Aquinas) spoke about what we today call "Art", they saw it much more as a sharing in the work of the redemption or, more accurately, the "at-one-ment" of a fallen and broken up creation, than an imitation of the original divine creative act itself.

To them, as also to the Byzantine iconographers, it was obvious that the painter or sculptor was not so much making something out of nothing (which is the strict meaning of "creation"), but rather picking up pre-existent bits of matter and re-forming them, somewhat as fallen nature was transformed by grace, in anticipation of glory.

It is striking that, just as with Zen Buddhists, the paradigmatic "Art" was that of gardening. To the Benedictine monk as to the Zen Buddhist, the garden was the prime example of artistic activity. The bent of nature left to itself was to become wilder and more chaotic, while human beings could contribute to make it significant. That indeed was the pre-Cartesian concept of "Art": the provision of human assistance for the redressal of fallen beauty. That is the root-concept out of which the Modern concept of "Art" was antithetically derived over the centuries from the Renaissance onwards. During the process the focus was shifted in the understanding of Art from the transfiguration of matter to the invention of "ideas". The emphasis on creation led to the loss of any strongly-felt awareness that a painting or sculpture was in the first place a material object, restructured so that it acquired or changed meaning. Almost inevitably it began to be thought that beauty resided in "pure form." This strange belief came to be entertained and propagated not only by such Idealist philosophers as Benedetto Croce, but also by self-styled neo-Scholastics such as Maritain and Gilson. Its almost universal diffusion undoubtedly aided and abetted the characteristic fea-

ture of our culture which might be called "the loss of respect for objects and for objectivity." This anti-objectivist corollary of the Cartesian concept of the human being as essentially a spiritual Ego has an intimate, although complex, relationship to the prophecy and the phenomenon of the death of Art.

There is perhaps no more typical place and significant feature of our culture than the junkyard. In that location we witness the reduction of objects to "spare parts" followed by their "recycling." This de-objectification can easily be symbolic of the deconstructive process to which values are also being subjected in our time and of their convulsion in the quasi-chaotic cyclicality of our consumer society.

The double movement of rapid destruction of objects and quick recovery of their relics for some sort of re-utilization seems to express a twist in the attitude toward Time of most human beings at this turn of the millennium. On the one hand hitherto Time seemed to be the destructive scythe spelling out the end of all beautiful things, on the other it appeared to be the moving mirror of eternal creativity. But a difference has emerged between past and present perceptions of this intrinsic ambivalence of Time.

In the past, it was usual for instance, for the builders of the early Christian basilicas to reutilize columns, capitals and other elements of pagan temples, because they deliberately wished to show that the pagan heritage was not being completely rejected but, on the contrary, that the beauty of some of its constituents was not only positively appreciated, but also carried over from the past into the new religion and way of life.

Since the early twentieth century, on the other hand, there have emerged art-practices which seem to celebrate waste and refuse as if in their own right. It was conceivable once to regard waste with a quasi-religious awe as evidence of the superabundant energy which the Creator had communicated to His creation. But today, in the context of a nihilistically inclined culture, it is seen as beautiful just inasmuch as it bears witness to the destructiveness of Time.

One of the manifestations of this shift from reverence towards objects to a loss of belief in their substantial existence and their consideration as just a projection in a totally relativistic space-time of the workings of the human mind is the rejection of the framed painting hung on a wall. Instead, the work of art is alleged by many of our contemporaries to be not an object but an idea unfolded over a sequence of time and in a polyvolumetric space.

Ave Appiano has impressively contrasted the portrayal of rejects (whether human beings or related material objects) by artists in the period from the Renaissance to the Modernists,



with the treatment of the same kind of subject by post-Modern artists. For instance Caravaggio in his *Death of the Virgin* (1605, Louvre) takes a drowned woman, perhaps a self-destructed prostitute as the model for the divinely glorified corpse of the Virgin Mary in order to conjure up a deeply religious consciousness of the common humanity powerfully revealed by death. The effect is as though the fate of an unidentified wretched human being was being redeemed and rescued for eternity. Likewise Van Gogh, in painting objects such as the shoes in the still life now at the Baltimore Museum of Art, brings out the enduring traces of a lost beauty, of the immortality of the sorrows and joys which contributed to the wearing out and destruction of the shoes. These poor used-up objective aids to human walking become icons of transcendent and sacred values.

If we turn now to the post-Modernists – from as far back as the early fifties – such as Fautrier and Dubuffet, Tapes and Burri we find them using unstructured, heterogeneous materials (in the case of Burri empty patched or just torn sacks, burnt strips of wood and scraps of metal sheets) as metaphors of the human condition. For these artists the object is annulled and there only remains the trace of a gesture.

Later artists went further on to actually use animal and human excrements besides all kinds of refuse and garbage. There seems to have occurred a general adoption of the image of sweeping to represent the de-reification wrought by time. Perhaps the most impressive of this kind of artistic display were the self-destructive machines of Tinguely. In other monumental constructions, capable only of infinite emissions of repetitive and useless noise, he moreover evoked a sphere of being in which no object succeeds even in carrying out its suicidal intent, but only in transforming itself into a means of unbearable hammering operations.

Some artists ended up identifying themselves with the objects sent to the scrapyard for destruction. However even in such rituals ("compression" or "expansion") of self-identification with matter by artists such as Cesar, there is in the imaginative play with relics and fragments, the expression of regret and transcendent totality – but it tends to be desperate. In fact the image of the contemporary artist endlessly searching in the junkyard for minuscule remnants of objects which could have been the matter of abandoned dreams, suggests that he is engaged in an indefinite rite of preparation for his own disappearance. The search for some hidden inwardness of soul concealed in old fragments of trash appears to be an increasingly frequent theme of happenings, installations and minimalist performances.

It does not appear that these manifestations which have survived the death of Art are merely cynical double celebrations of the death of Man together with the death of the Artist. The post-Modernists consistently reject the idea of the artist as an exceptional being, the genius, cut apart from ordinary mortal men, just as they reject the idea of the work of art as a clearly delimited object. Notoriously, some artists began to present found objects which they considered to become works of art just by decontextualisation; so too an artist like Joseph Beuys began to proclaim that everyman is an artist.

In all this, there is more than a hint of the return to the idea of the artist as, in Luc Ferry's words, "an intercessor or intermediary between a superior world beyond the human, and the "sublunary" world." Once the artists no longer considered himself to deserve the name of "genius" in virtue of "works" which were nothing but exhibitions of his Ego, he again began to hope to be the humble medium or occasion for "epiphanies" (as James Joyce called them) of either a pointer transcending the cosmic in the manner of the ancient Greeks or of the Holy in the manner of all the other civilizations which preceded our own.

It seems certain that the future of Art cannot lie in the direction of the continued repetition of gestures the only meaning of which is to proclaim a break of tradition. Nor does it seem possible to escape banality by whatever name it may be called ("Americanization", "showmanship" etc) without some kind of search in the most humble of human affairs.

It is true that in the course of the twentieth century, on the one hand the totalitarian states of the left and of the right did their utmost to suppress the succession of *avant garde* movements in Art; on the other, the merchants in the so-called democracies of the rich countries have sought often successfully to assimilate even revolutionary minded artists into the folds of the consumer society.

However it would be entirely mistaken for artists to believe that the mortal enemy of Art can be totally identified with any dominant political ideology or limited centre of power. The deepest threat to Art has to be recognised as continuing from the reduction of existence to one-dimensional flatness, literally to a "platitude", without any opening upon the transcendent or belief that beauty is the splendour of truth. In such a condition artists wholly denuded of their prophetic function will only be able to survive as "cultural animators" or decorators at the behest of the state or the wealthy.

The proliferation of exotic religious sects and of an often totally artificial religiosity in attempts at reversing the "disenchantment" of the world by science and technology is a sign of



the failure of the Church to provide open channels to the rediscovery of a horizon of existence transcending death.

Indeed the religious establishment is often rather an obstacle than a help to the perception of both the objectivity of Beauty and the Kantian conviction of the logical connection between the idea of Beauty and the idea of God. Kant considered God to be the symbol of the reconciliation of the sensory and the intellectual, the particular and the universal in the concreteness of individual beings in communion. The artist is often the unconscious locus through which this idea of God is made manifest.

For many geo-historical and socio-political reasons the situation of Malta provides it with special challenges and perhaps unique opportunities. Partly because since the Ottoman breakdown of the silk route to China and consequently discovery of America, the Mediterranean world has been a cultural backwater, the artistic saga of the twentieth century with its repetitive succession of *avant garde* movements has not really been lived in Malta. Belated ripples of Modernism only reached our shores by the time that post-Modernism elsewhere had already reared its challenging head. At the same time, the spirit of the Baroque religion did not lose its flamboyance despite the processes of secularisation and disenchantment pervading the global environment.

It is striking that while the Church continued to be in Malta the major provider of commissions for art works, few of these have resulted in works of beauty throughout the last century. On the other hand many of the most explorative of Maltese artists kept on producing works of art which undoubtedly were attempts at revealing the sense of the transcendent, often through explicitly religious themes, but most of these works were not made for liturgical use or for insertion or performance in church precincts.

For instance Charles Camilleri has composed world-acknowledged masterpieces such as *Missa Mundi* and *Unum Deum* for organ, but they are not, despite their titles, pieces for liturgical performances. Likewise the many "sacred spaces" which Richard England designed and furnished, during almost a working lifetime between Manikata and Qawra, are essentially areas admirably suited for private meditation, rather than chapels as conventionally understood in Malta.

Is it conceivable that these kinds of artistic exploration move out of the marginality characteristic of the social position of the *avant garde* artist into more central positions in the expressions and practices of Maltese culture?

Clearly there is no question of any revivalistic return to any period of the past, Medieval Baroque or Megalithic, even

though the cult of the earth goddess no less than its Christian successors are attractive sources of inspiration, but the rich storehouse of the past can perhaps be of help in the generation of future works.

It is characteristic of many of the masters of the art of the twentieth century that they have reinterpreted the truth of works of the past which were in danger of being regarded as dumb. Both Picasso and Bacon did it for Velasquez, Stravinsky did it in music, and Joyce in literature. These are works in which recapitulation amounts to a different attitude to time and history from that of the post-Modernists.

Malta has always been a meeting place of different cultures and could no doubt fulfil a catalytic role in the age of great flourishing of cultural tourism. The most important point is the ability to resist what on another occasion I have called "the Calypso temptation". Calypso, in the *Odyssey*, is the counterpart of Circe; the two nymphs represent respectively the temptation to become a brute and to become an immortal, for Ulysses who is striving to be just human. Calypso on the island of *Ogygia* (identified by many with Gozo) invites Ulysses to forget about family and politics far away in the island of Ithaca of which he was king, in order to live with her in an unaging timeless condition. Is not this the temptation to which artists are almost always subject?

It is not unconceivable that Malta (including perhaps especially Gozo) could prove to be a propitious place where Art as conceived by Hegel could be happily buried together with the associated figures of Nietzsche's totalitarian God and Foucault's Cartesian man. Malta could then become a privileged place for every human being to discover that he or she is a special kind of artist, instead of the artist being a special kind of human being; also that it is possible to reform any object and transform it into a thing of beauty.

Wittgenstein at the beginning of the *Tractatus* said that the world was not made up of things but of happenings. This world-view, which projects into the starkest relief the temporality of existence, has been perhaps adopted to an excessive degree by post-Modern artists.

Both objects (emphasising the relative permanence) and happenings (emphasising the essential transcendence of the objects of our experience) can be made beautiful.

They have to be explored in the dawn of this third millennium after Christ in multiple perspectives mostly with co-operative commitment and often in relation to an individual sitting.

The reformation of matter which has always been the basic operation of artistic endeavour is the polar opposite of the



re-cycling characteristic of the consumer society and of which Elton John recycling a song written for Marilyn Monroe re-used it for Princess Diana is an extreme illustration.

Can St James Cavalier assist in the achievement of enabling Malta to rise to the challenges? The true challenge is

that of the authentic democratization of Art. That means rescuing our lives from the platitudinization threatened not so much by market globalization as by the eclipse of the transcendent from our individual lives in our common environment.

Peter Serracino Inglott was born in Malta in 1936 and was admitted at the University at the age of fifteen and has not managed to escape its folds ever since. He was educated at the University of Malta (1951-1955), the University of Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar (1955-1958), Institut Catholique de Paris (1958-1960), and the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano (1960-1963).

He is a priest who has never lost traces of his earliest vocation to be a clown. He has received many degrees, both honorary and studied for, as well as national and international honours including Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa) Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, U.S.A. (1989), Doctor of the University, (Honoris Causa) Brunel University, U.K. (1993), Honorary Fellow of the International Institute of Culture Ebraica Salemi, Israel (1993), Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur (France) (1994), The Cross of Merit, Portugal (1995), Cavalier di Gran Croce dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana (1995), Companion of the Order of Merit, Malta (1995).

He has served as Rector of the University of Malta (1987-1988, 1991-1996), Chairman of the Malta Council for Science and Technology (1987-1996), Chairman of the Mediterranean Institute at the University of Malta (1987 to date), Visiting Professor at the University of Paris II (Sorbonne - Pantheon) (1989-1990) and the University of Ottawa (1970-1971), UNESCO Fellow at the Open University (1978), Guest Lecturer at the Universities of Cincinnati (U.S.A.), the Università Cattolica of Milan, Ca Foscari (Venice) and Palermo. He served also as President of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (1994-1995), Chairman of the Commonwealth Science Council, Consultant to UNESCO (Division of Human Settlements and the Socio-Cultural Environment), Consultant on Curriculum Development to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (U.S.A.).

He is the author of various books in Maltese and English, of numerous articles mainly in the border areas between philosophy and the human sciences, but also adventuring in other equally dubious fields, such as writing libretti for investigative operas.