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MY ANSWER TO “WHAT IS ART? HORIZONS OF THE CREATOR AND RECIPIENT”*

I am a life-long theatre enthusiast, both an avid spectator and an academic specialist in the field, who, until recently, has never imagined my life without the experience of live theatre performance. This strikes me as odd now. I grew up in the Polish People’s Republic where exposure to Western culture from behind the Iron Curtain was limited, belated, and absurdly censored, and I quickly became aware of the historical precarity of our access to culture, as well as mindful of my own good fortune in not being born earlier or in another corner of the communist laboratory. Yet it was not the experience of communist repressions but that of a global pandemic that finally forced me to contemplate a life deprived of live theatre.

Fast forward to 2022, and the question about the essence of art that I am addressing here. It is a disquieting and challenging, perhaps even a paradoxical question that asks to consider the notion of art having a universal (objective?) essence from our specific, subjective position. Defining art’s essence frankly seems impossible in the age of anti-essentialism, and even the seemingly easier task of identifying one’s own positionality has become overwhelming given the complexities and instabilities of our world. Over the course of the last three years alone, we have been rattled by seismic shifts including the already mentioned pandemic (with all its arbitrary, often absurd policies), the rise of racial, social, cultural, and political radicalism, the beginning of a barbaric war in Ukraine, and an increasingly unhinged global economy. The revealed fault lines are countless and highlight the failings of Western liberal democracy, signalling the coming of a profound civilizational crisis to its proponents. It is against this background that

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* To this formula a note has been added: “Please, express your opinion, by formulating an answer to the question about the essence of art, specifying the position from which you write.”

I will nevertheless attempt to offer some insight into the nature of art that reveals my standpoint without being completely contingent on my perspective.

Two premises determine this perspective. The first is intellectual and aesthetic. My understanding and appreciation of art have been shaped by Western traditions. It is their fertile, complex, if often problematic relationships with other cultures that inform my interpretive and aesthetic sensitivity. The second is anthropological and existential and affirms the centrality of the human subject to art's creation, transmission, and reception despite the considerable and continuous challenges to its stability, if not existence, posed by dominant theoretical approaches, from poststructuralism to post/transhumanism and beyond, over the course of the last century.

This declaration makes me pause. Barely three years ago, I co-founded the BMO Lab in Creative Research in the Arts, Performance, Emerging Technologies and AI in the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto. Its mission is to explore the interfaces between humans and machines in theatre and performance with the understanding that humans could eventually disappear from this equation. How can I still maintain that discussing art means discussing human subjects? Yes, subjects – rather than amalgams (however well put together) of tissues, organs, neurons, etc., or socio-cultural constructs that can be refashioned at will, or cyborgs whose fraught connection with machines and technology has long molded our relationality to the world. There is no denying our biological, psychological, sociological, and technological makeup (and the role these elements play in art), but they exhaust neither our being nor existence. However fragile and complex the notion of subjectivity may currently seem (and we should not disown the reasons for, and consequences of, this fragility and complexity), for me, it is still a desperately flawed, dangerously and excitingly precarious, and remarkably capable singular human subject that stands at the core of artistic creation (without needing to be its subject matter) and is, moreover, defined by it. We express ourselves and our relationship to the world in art and art, in turn, tells us more about who we are as both individuals and a species.

As self-aware and doubting mortals conditioned by our bodies, emotions, spirits, and minds to interact with others, we crave self-expression and connection and experience the (singularly human?) impulse for transcendence. This is what makes us simultaneously social and individual, interactive and meditative, horizontal and vertical. Endowed with imagination, we can envision ourselves and others differently and are capable of questioning, if not always changing, the status quo. Not everyone is equally dissatisfied with things as they are, not everyone acts on such dissatisfaction creatively, and not all such creativity is art. But some expressions, when given a unique form (which assumes awareness of

artistic tradition) with uncommon skillfulness (which presupposes training and talent), have the distinct power of speaking to others. Władysław Tatarkiewicz has said as much in his now classic definition of art, whatever its limitations: "Art is the reproduction of things, or the construction of forms, or the expression of experiences — *if* the product of such reproduction, construction, or expression can awe, or move, or jolt us."¹ Whether intellectual, aesthetic, ethical, axiological, affective, spiritual, or all the above, such power manifests in a moment of awe, an insight, a feeling, an impression, an intuition, or all the above. It orients us anew in the ultimate strangeness of our finality that plays itself out in the inspiring and treacherous dynamics of chaos and order, insatiability and fulfilment, dissociation and engagement, individualism and collectivism, to name just a few of the dichotomies that define our human experience on earth.

At the beginning of 2020, as all theatres in Canada closed along with other public spaces in response to the pandemic, the thought of life without live theatre made its long-delayed entry into my consciousness. While many aspects of our daily lives transitioned to a full-scale online existence, some forms of human experience, in particular religious and artistic, were less amenable to such transition. Though related, I will leave the first aside to focus on the latter here. As I became enthralled with new online digital performances, I quickly realized that it was not their mastery of the medium, but rather the intensity of the human spirit contending with adversity, that was their greatest value. The internet was bursting with defiant and oddly appealing performances that I couldn't get enough of initially. As the year went by, however, their appeal waned even as the professionalism and quality of online productions grew. What I found inspiring as an expression of the defiant human spirit could no longer successfully substitute for the experience of live performance as a commodity, a situation undoubtedly made worse by the fact that, with so much of our professional lives taking place online, this mode of expression, communication, and connection became commonplace and tiresome. In other words, when the distance between art and life collapsed, in my experience art bizarrely suicided.²

I expected my enthusiasm for live theatre to return with a vengeance, and yet when it did return with the easing of some restrictions, the displays of pandemic

¹ My emphasis. Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje Sześciu Pojęć* [The Story of the Six Concepts] (Warszawa: PWN, 1988), 52. "Sztuka jest odtwarzaniem rzeczy, bądź konstruowaniem form, bądź wyrażaniem przeżyć – jeśli wytwór tego odtwarzania, konstruowania, wyrażania jest zdolny zachwycać, bądź wzruszać, bądź wstrząsać." The translation into English is also mine.

² This reminds me of Matei Calinescu's diagnosis of the avant-garde's "suicide" transpiring from its aspirations to merge life and art. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 124.

savoir vivre quickly dissuaded me from attending. I found the policing of vaccine mandates that took place in Toronto until late June 2022 in some cases, along with the aura of self-righteousness emanating from the disciplined inspectors and displayers of vaccine certificates in theatre foyers, and the masked audience, nothing short of depressing. Irrespective of whether these measures were necessary for theatres to reopen and survive, these social manifestations of the (arbitrarily) privileged access to art triggered a strong resentment in me toward institutionalized theatre embracing this both puritan and messianic approach. These feelings only intensified when I saw how quickly this approach, riding the wave of woke culture, moved from the foyer to the stage, presenting our undeniably overwhelmingly complex world in simplistic and reductive terms that Alexander Grau's book aptly calls "hypermoralization."³

The most innovative European theatre has experimented with the audience-stage relationship for decades and often made the foyer speak a similar language to the stage (Kantor's intrusive/abusive treatment of his audience in the 1972 production of Witkacy's *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* is just one example). The recent situation bears some similarity to this past practice at first, but the key difference is that the foyer now dictates the language of the stage (not *vice versa*) which curtails the theatre to take any risks. Such daring requires intellectual and artistic courage, curiosity, and a strong sense of independence, not to mention a measure of distance from contemporary life and a deep trust in art's power. In my experience, it is this resoluteness that makes the difference between good and bad art.

Against the backdrop of our deeply fraught world, the ability to distinguish between good and bad art seems more pertinent than grasping its universal essence (which may well be defined by its resistance to definitions). Good art is not "propaganda, or magic, or medicine."⁴ It is not a display of self-righteous, therapeutically moralistic, safe and correct views about everything. Such views degenerate into clichés over time, but before they do, unfortunately, they parade as critical thinking. Good art is not safe: it ruffles rather than reassures, and it *wants* to be judged. It is audacious and free, also in setting its own limits.

Good art is a metaphor, not a metonymy; a question, not an answer; a promise, not a fulfilment; a trigger for something unknown, forgotten, or unimaginable, not a confirmation of what we already know. Good art also testifies to the complexities of our struggles with limitations (whether conceptual, physical, emotional, or spiritual) and to our aspirations to search beyond the horizon and

³ See his 2017 book, *Hypermoral: Die neue Lust an der Empörung* (München: Claudius, 2017).

⁴ I am not alone in thinking so. See David Bromwich, "The Rise of Bad Art and the Decline of Political Candor," *The Nation Weekly*, issue July 25 / August 1, 2022, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/bad-art-top-gun/>.

test our potentialities, to transgress in ways that are more exploratory than emancipatory. At its heart (and certainly in my heart) art is the expression of what is divine and demonic in us (also in the non-believers) – an insatiable yearning for impossible perfection shared by art creators and recipients alike. This is the reason why I reread Tadeusz Różewicz’s plays and poetry and repeatedly watch Tadeusz Kantor’s productions. This is also why I admire Marie Chouinard’s choreographies, despite – or perhaps because of – the physical grotesqueness and uncanniness of her dancers’ bodies, and Dimitris Papaioannou’s “quest for grace and beauty” of his naked actors brushing against metallic plates in “The Great Tamer.”⁵ This is also why I shun carnal art of plastic surgeries whether Orlan’s, Stelarc’s, or Nina Arsenault’s.

In retrospect, on the 35th anniversary of moving to North America, I understand why I never thought about the disappearance of live theatre before. In my lifetime, even behind the iron curtain, good (risk-taking, resilient, subversive, courageous, and independent) theatre was always there to watch. Only such theatre (art) is worthwhile.

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⁵ Dimitris Papaioannou, “The Great Tamer,” Festival d’Avignon, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://festival-avignon.com/en/edition-2017/programme/the-great-tamer-7193>.