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Surveying The Aesthetic Dimension at the Death of Postmodernism

If pressed on the subject of political correctness and art, Marcuse often recounted an anecdote that pleased him a great deal. It was about the painter Victor Neep, who, when "challenged" to explain the "alleged element of protest" in Cezanne's "A Still Life with Apples," responded, "It is a protest against sloppy thinking."

—Barry Katz, Herbert Marcuse and the Art of Liberation

The Last Decade

The eighties were a contradictory time for the art world. The market went wild, rewarding with fame and fortune those artists deemed fashionable, while others who had not as yet "made it" waited nervously, caught in a dream of imminent possibility. Students entered art schools optimistic and idealistic about their futures. New galleries sprang up everywhere, and more people seemed interested in the art displayed than ever before. Openings were flooded with non-art world types like investment bankers who all seemed to be "collecting." Writing about art proliferated. Museum attendance was on the rise. From the outside it seemed like a boom. However, from the inside, there was a definite sense that something had gone askew. Although many people did seem preoccupied with looking at art, few really understood what they were looking at. That which did succeed in galleries and museums often referenced itself only to art. If one were not part of that world, the allusions to the work of other artists past and present were difficult to uncode, as were the extreme innovations in form that renounced traditional conventions and left viewers asking, "But is it art?" It was easy to think that much on display, although marketable, had lost a sense of social purpose. There seemed to be a great aesthetic and political demoralization manifested in the confusion of many artists over what to make work about.
Other trends were also observable. Among those not pulled by the art world's capricious lure were those more socially conscious artists who also emerged in great strength in the eighties with a clear critique of an art world that mirrored the larger social system and appeared to them as insular, elite, intellectually corrupt, and exclusionary. Women artists in particular recognized the full extent of the power of patriarchy to reinforce and reward male artists. Their work no longer remained silent about these conditions. Artists of color began to make their art overtly expose how entrenched and insidious the racism of the art world actually was. Gay and lesbian art appeared with confidence and strength. At the same time, artistic articulations of the horrors of AIDS were to be found in all media.

The enthusiastic adoption of theory—writing about gender, race, class, media studies, psychoanalysis—also changed the character of the art world in the eighties. It constructed a parallel universe of ideas from which the art world took sustenance and to which it added image, metaphor, and its own discourse. The new emphasis on theory within the "postmodern" period has proved to be a mixed blessing. It undoubtedly infused the art world with complex ideas and helped formulate the concept of political correctness. However, theory also created a split between past generations trained to work intuitively on aspects of form and a new generation clearly driven by content and metadiscussions about the nature of content. As the art world attempted to make sense of these complexities, such political figures as Jesse Helms and Alfonse D’Amato complicated matters by taking the law into their own hands, questioning the “morality” of more controversial work and the legitimacy of government funding to art that some found “offensive” and downright “anti-American.” Fueled by these issues, the art world entered the nineties immersed in debate about what artists should be doing, how they should be doing it, and why they might do it at all.

If the present period of the early nineties can be categorized as post-postmodern, it is because artists have recognized the limits of postmodernism and have come to a point where they are no longer content to remain on the edge making radical statements to the art world alone. Rather, many artists now want to intersect with the center and to address the concerns of a larger audience. As a result we have come to an exciting, if difficult, moment: The art world has assimilated the lessons of post-
modernism—its irreverent mocking of form, challenge to the notion of a coherent subject, political sophistication, cynicism, and isolation—yet out of this assimilation an analysis has evolved that incorporates the realities of the economic and political crisis, the capriciousness of the gallery, the market system, as well as the alienation artists feel. The sense of why people make work, how they make it, and to whom it is addressed are all affected. At this time there is no doubt that many artists want to be relevant to the world in which they live and comprehensible to those with whom they share this world.

Because the art scene has changed in these often seemingly contradictory ways, it is now time to do a serious exploration of the phenomena of the artist in society and the impact of art within a social context. This exploration should be useful to those writers, intellectuals, and artists who struggle to combat regressiveness in the art world while defending it against the reactionary puritanism of “outsiders” who would abuse it as a scapegoat for all that is wrong in contemporary society. The art world needs to further its understanding of how conflicting tendencies come together. Unfortunately, there are few places to turn for such a vision. It is therefore a fortuitous moment to revisit the work of the Frankfurt School—those intellectuals whose historical and philosophical mission was to make sense of a senseless world. In particular it is useful to rethink the importance of Herbert Marcuse's last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, and to consider how his ideas might be reinterpreted in this difficult post-postmodern era, in this time of political urgency and despair. Perhaps we can take from his analysis a much-needed sense of possibility, or as Marcuse himself might say, “hope.”

A Return to *The Aesthetic Dimension*

*The Aesthetic Dimension* begins with a disarming apology: “In a situation where the miserable reality can be changed only through radical political praxis, the concern with aesthetics demands justification. It would be senseless to deny the element of despair inherent in this concern: the retreat into a world of fiction where existing conditions are changed and overcome only in the realm of the imagination.”

In this statement, published in 1978, Marcuse admits that he was be-
ginning to lose faith in the possibility that the "miserable" political environ­
ment could be changed. At such a point of crisis, as his own optimism 
waned, he returned to aesthetics—his early, great love. He focused pri­
marily on literature, about which he could speak with an unhesitating au­
thority that was lacking in his knowledge of the visual arts. And when he 
got back to what in the beginning had fed his own utopian ideals, he did 
so with a deliberate agenda. He was attempting to use this reexamination 
to refute Marxist notions about the function of art in society, which he 
saw as limited, didactic, and naive. He railed against the idea that art, 
which focuses on the "declining class" (i.e., the bourgeoisie), is decadent 
and that consequently all art should focus on the "ascending class" (i.e., 
the proletariat). He was quite clear that art need not represent the social 
relations of production directly. In fact, the indirect ways in which art 
does represent these social relations may well prove to be the more signifi­
cant and profound:

I shall submit the following thesis: the radical qualities of art, that is to 
say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the 
beautiful image . . . of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimen­
sions where art transcends its social determination and emancipates it­
self from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving 
its overwhelming presence. Thereby art creates the realm in which the 
subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible: the world 
formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and dis­
torted in the given reality.¹

In its refusal to be absorbed within the reality principle or to adhere to 
the rules of the reality principle, in its insistence on addressing the issues 
of subjectivity and the presentation of contradiction, art refuses the no­
tion that there can be any simple transformation of society or that "all of 
that which art invokes and indicts could be settled through the class 
struggle."² But if art does indict, what comprises its indictment?

According to Marcuse, all humans have been forced to repress basic in­
stincts in order to survive within civilization as it has been constructed. 
Such is the premise of Eros and Civilization, in which Marcuse asks, 
"How can civilization freely generate freedom, when unfreedom has be­
come part and parcel of the mental apparatus?"³ In Marcuse's sense art is
a location—a designated imaginative space within which the experience of freedom is allowed to exist. Art “challenges the monopoly of the established reality” by creating “fictitious worlds” in which one can see mirrored that range of human emotion and experience that does not find an outlet in the present reality. In this sense the fabricated world of art becomes “more real than reality itself.” It presents the possibility of a fulfillment that in truth only a transformed society could offer. It is the reminder of what a truly integrated experience of oneself in society might be. Art can embody a tension that keeps hope alive about a “memory of the happiness that once was, and that seeks its return.” In such a configuration there must be a sense that there is something beyond the reality principle, even if the existence of such a different condition can only exist within the imagination. In its ability to conjure those dimensions of the individual’s emotional life not dominated by the social system, art, according to Marcuse, is able to sustain an image of humanness—an image of human beings as “species beings” capable of living in that community of freedom that is the potential of the species. The recognition of this potential is the “subjective basis of a classless society.” The image of the liberated human psyche can be communicated by art not only through a literal representation of the utopian dream, as has been the case in socialist realist work, but in the emotions such work is able to elicit.

This range of emotional response can be transmitted by the struggles depicted in content and their embodiment in form. The manifestation of these ideas within a form that has integrity is the achievement of art. Through form, art can portray humanness on a grand scale, beyond the class struggle. At the point where form becomes content, the artist lives best, and individuals can experience a spectrum of imaginative possibilities crucial to envisioning and manifesting a revolutionary process.

Marcuse believed that a great deal of the radical potential of art lies in its ability to play with and yet exist outside of the reality principle. Because art actually serves no demonstrable function within the society, its purpose must be articulated from outside the immediate experience it generates. The act of observing art may have a transformative effect on a person, but within a society of alienation its actual use value is often discounted. In fact, Marcuse might say that within a capitalist system the deepest purposes of art go against the basic premises on which capitalism is constructed. Its only really justifiable place would be as an object that
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can be bought, speculated on, and sold for a profit within the art market. Its worth as a tool to regenerate the lost, hidden, creative, spiritual, intuitive aspects of human life will never be given their proper value under capitalism.

At its best, art serves a different master than capitalism, one whose values are not as readily discerned. Although its place in the order of things is not always clearly articulated, no one would publicly advocate a society that did not, at least in theory, encourage creative expression as manifested in art. The idea of a society without art seems impoverished. The necessary tension between the longing embedded in people’s desire for a fuller life, or a more complete self, and the world in which they live would be obliterated. That which is almost unspeakable, that which cannot be contained, is allowed to live through the form of art. This is why art at times is perceived as subversive: not simply because it presents a world that appears immoral, or licentious, as is often thought, but because it reminds people of buried desires that their deepest selves actually dream and cannot manifest within the existing system.

Marcuse locates this vision of possibility within the well-articulated space of the aesthetic dimension. It is a place that stands in negation to the reality principle. It does not embody what is, but what wants to be. “One of the foremost tasks of art,” writes Walter Benjamin, “has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later.”

“Later,” within Marcuse’s system, could only be realized within a revolutionary society.

Art need not necessarily exist only within the domain of the pleasure principle. If successful, it could also be found wherever human potentiality is able to manifest itself. Art allows for this actualization through the vehicle of form—a physical organization that captures a range of intangible experience. Artists, Marcuse says, are those for whom form becomes content. This becomes the source of their strength and alienation. Those outside the art-making process may not consciously understand why they respond to the work as they do. They may be unaware that the work’s embodiment of beauty, coherence, properties of elegance, or deliberate refusal to allow for the experience of elegance does affect their ability to understand the content of the work intellectually and emotionally. Well-executed art stands as both part of and not part of the society out of which it has emerged. It has not bought into the demands of the “misera-
ble reality.” It has not accepted the limiting prejudices of race, class, gender. While commenting on such issues, it is also capable of moving beyond them. Thus, when art is effective, in Marcuse’s terms, it appeals to progressive people. It may well contain within it a critique of the prevailing ideology. Or, as in Neep’s understanding of Cezanne’s *Still Life with Apples*, the clarity and integrity of form itself may prove subversive, especially when all else in society seems in disarray.

There is no doubt that this is a utopian vision of the place of art in society, because it allows for the possibility that art itself could embody utopia and in so doing annihilate the reality principle. Marcuse is not naive about how this transcendence will occur. He does not expect or want the experience of art to be easy. On the contrary, he rejects the notion that art should try to reach a large audience directly. He does not think that art is life or that it should attempt to appear to be life. According to Marcuse, its strength is its otherness, the fact that it cannot readily be assimilated. If art comes too close to reality, if it strives too hard to be comprehensible or accessible, then it runs the risk of becoming mundane. If this occurs, its function as negation is lost. To be effective, art must exert its capacity for estrangement. It must dislocate the viewer, reader, audience by its refusal and inability to become part of the reality principle or to in any way anticipate the needs of the performance principle. It should not help people to assimilate into the existing society but at each turn challenge the assumptions of that society, whether it is through the intellectual and visual rigor it demands and/or the heightened recognition of pleasure and pain it provides.

**Political Correctness and Uncompromising Estrangement**

The ideas of *The Aesthetic Dimension*, ideas that might have seemed dated only a few years ago, now present themselves as useful once again. As the debates about political correctness rage in the art world, current thinking about the question of how artists can make a significant statement and how best to fight against the prevailing ideology often seems naive and oblivious of the fact that the same debates have already occurred and been recorded by the literary world. If the pressure of the eighties was to make pastiche, engage in appropriation, and primarily ref-
ere the art world itself, the pressure of the nineties is to make politically correct work. But what constitutes politically correct work? The art world often confers this definition on art whose content is overtly and clearly about political concerns. Marcuse takes issue with the simplicity of these assumptions: “The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimensions. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change. In this sense, there may be more subversive potential in the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud than in the didactic plays of Brecht.”

These would be fighting words were they written today, because the art world, for the most part, does not tolerate such juxtapositions. It has often simplified the nature of the political to reward certain content. But this has also meant that it has denied the possibility that work too easily designated as “bourgeois” might actually serve a significant, political purpose. The American Left in particular has always had a restricted understanding of form. The same audience that can tolerate extremes in content, that actually desires a revolutionary message, cannot grasp the degree to which innovations in form can also be radical when those formal innovations change the scope of what people are able to see. If the content is not overtly, directly, simply about social concerns, and the work is not easily accessible in a formal sense, then it is not thought to be political.

Within this paradigm, art, to be acceptable, must be “anti-art”—art that refuses to be art, refuses to take pleasure in its own formal properties, or denies conventional forms and therefore defies traditional expectations. But within Marcuse’s particular understanding, art that becomes anti-art closely aligns with the reality of day-to-day life and not with the conventions of art making. This art only recreates fragmentation in its simulation of reality and, in so doing, runs the risk of losing its subversive potential. We have seen such anti-art in the sixties, seventies, and eighties. It was often work in which the statement was more significant than its execution, or complexity was sacrificed to a sense of what would be readily understood. It was work often lacking in metaphor. In the nineties it is often linked to the idea of political correctness. Of this complex issue Marcuse writes: “While the abandonment of the aesthetic form
may well provide the most immediate, most direct mirror of a society in which subjects and objects are shattered, atomized, robbed of their words and images, the rejection of the aesthetic sublimation turns such work into bits and pieces of the very society whose anti-art they want to be. Anti-art is self-defeating from the outset." 11

Marcuse clearly rejects the notion that art can effectively comment on the degeneration of society by merely recreating that degeneration, or that it can attack the one-dimensionality of society by reproducing that one-dimensionality. Such art, in its refusal to develop a transcendent form and in its mirroring of the “miserable reality,” reflects that which already exists and is in a sense too familiar. It does not allow for the factor of estrangement. We have witnessed this in video, performance, and installation art, as well as in painting. The key to its failure, Marcuse might say, is not its content but rather its refusal to embody that content in an aesthetically challenging form which would further the question and push the viewer or the reader to a more complex, more emotional, or more revelatory understanding of the problem posed by the work.

This particular aspect of Marcuse’s analysis is the most controversial for those who see his refusal to accept what he calls anti-art as an attempt to suffocate art and artists within conventional, formal, “bourgeois” boundaries. But it would seem that Marcuse is not so much interested in restricting form as he is in fostering work that refuses to simulate the present reality and hence encourages people to imagine something else. His analysis is also founded on the idea that however radically it may at first seem to smash traditional forms, the shock value will ultimately be lost if the form later appears to be too similar to the experience of daily life. Even today these issues are still not sufficiently discussed within the art world. The need to make formally effective work is more than an abstract idea within Marcuse’s system. For him it is the idea, essential to the meaning of art itself: “In this sense, renunciation of the aesthetic form is abdication of responsibility. It deprives art of the very form in which it can create that other reality within the established one—the cosmos of hope.” 12

Within Marcuse’s concept of the artist, there are two fundamental principles: First, the artist has a responsibility to society; and second, art must embody hope. But Marcuse does not legislate how these principles should be achieved. Moreover, his sense that art should be hopeful does
not reflect a simple optimism but rather expresses his notion that a much-needed psychic space is created when contradictions are confronted within the aesthetic dimension. For Marcuse, hope lies within the imagination, within the peculiarly human ability to envision that which does not exist and give that imaginary dimension shape. He believes that this shape, this original organization, whether it is in painting, literature, or music, is precisely what is necessary to transcend the limitations of the reality principle. It is the task of all serious writers, artists, and intellectuals to attempt this feat. It is not simply that Marcuse wants art to exist on an elevated plane. There is tolerance within Marcuse's vision to embrace contemporary issues of daily life, as long as those issues are presented in a form that embodies their ability to transform themselves—that reveals their complexity and their emotional and political resonance. Even "death and destruction" should invoke the need for hope, "a need rooted in the new consciousness, embodied in the work of art."

In Marcuse's system, the "new consciousness" seems to be that realm of the imagination which has not yet been colonized by the reality principle, that aspect of the psyche which has managed to retain a desire for wholeness and has remained untouched by the oppressiveness of the reality principle or the deadening defeatism of the prevailing ideology.

The Accusation of Romanticization

It is easy to see why Marcuse has been called a romantic and why his work has received so little recent direct acknowledgement from the contemporary art world. Marcuse believed that there was a part of the human psyche that remained somehow invulnerable to the repressiveness of society. If art could tap into this part, then the psyche could be given shape and articulation, its wholeness explored no matter how fragmented the reality that surrounded it. But Marcuse's concept assumes a unified subject and a coherent sense of self that can escape alienation. It also assumes the existence of a universal subject from which one could extrapolate the idea that, at the core, humans can locate an arena of common experience. In the same vein, Marcuse implies that art can transcend racial, gender, and cultural differences through certain aesthetic forms. These forms are undoubtedly Eurocentric, grounded exclusively within
the Western tradition. This was the world out of which Marcuse evolved; it was the only world he really knew.

For these reasons *The Aesthetic Dimension* can be attacked and even dismissed. Clearly, after all the collective theoretical work that has resulted from postmodernism, certain aspects of Marcuse's thesis do stand in need of qualification. But even given such reservations, the issues raised in this, his last book are actually very timely and surprisingly synchronized with issues absorbing the contemporary art world.

At the center of Marcuse's theory, for example, is the issue of "the Beautiful," which he says appears time and again in progressive movements and is understood "as an aspect of the reconstruction of nature and society."\(^{14}\) Even when social upheaval is on the agenda, beauty often has been defined in a limited, benign way as "plastic purity and loveliness" and as "an extension of exchange values to the aesthetic-erotic dimension."\(^{15}\) Marcuse's philosophical understanding of beauty situates it in a more profound relationship to the issues of revolutionary change.

The beautiful, for Marcuse, is sensuous and is preserved in "aesthetic sublimation." The autonomy of art and its political potential rest in this sensuousness. Marcuse rails against a crude form of Marxist aesthetics which has rejected the idea of the beautiful as the central category of "bourgeois aesthetics" and has failed to grasp its subversive element. This leaves those artists anxious to make a strong statement about society without the possibility of creating work both political and beautiful, in Marcuse's sense. This is often why artists resist committing themselves to political movements. They fear the degree to which such alignments will deny them the right to engage in the sensuousness of the art-making process, as experienced in the love of materials and structure and the pleasure of translating abstract concepts into form. For most artists, these were the reasons they were drawn to art making in the first place.

Artists fear they will be forced to replace their love of this process for guilt derived from the enjoyment and pleasure they take in line, color, texture. In fact, the work considered most "subversive" is often filled with unpleasure, which is only a negation of the beautiful. This art is certainly not a vision of what is possible, not a vision capable of seducing anyone into believing either the more progressive philosophical understandings it represents or the future world it portends. In this sense Marcuse's understanding of the sensuousness of art could be subversive, especially if it is
understood that mass culture, as it exists in the United States, cannot comfortably tolerate that which is truly beautiful in his terms—that which exudes a deep resonance of originality and strong formal properties that allow complex meaning to evolve. Work fitting this definition of the beautiful would force people to consider what no longer exists except in dreams: memory of a time (whether real or imagined) when life was fulfilling and people’s relationship to it seemed less estranged. It is not necessary to prove or disprove the historical existence of such a time. Rather, it is important to note that throughout many social movements, the seemingly retroactive emotion of longing has proved to be a force propelling people forward. This feeling can be elicited through an appeal to the senses and to the emotional and psychological life of an individual. There is little in mass culture that attempts to touch people at all these levels. When longing does exist, it appears as melodrama and/or nostalgia. Such manifestations often homogenize difference by settling for a banal version of human experience. The result is a form of sublimation we tend to think of as “entertainment,” not the complex interaction of form and content we call art.

Art is too layered and, at times, too difficult to lend itself easily to mass appeal. That which profoundly moves the senses, the intellect, and the unconscious is essential to the well-being of the collective imagination. Yet, in American society, it only really receives mainstream attention when it has come under attack “in the name of morality and religion.” It is to its credit that some art can generate such an extreme response. Moralists, whether they know it or not, are fearful that such work will arouse people, not in a simple, sexual way, but in a sensual, provocative manner. They fear it might touch people’s deepest desires and challenge the mundanity, conformity, and repressiveness—the dissatisfaction they actually feel in their daily lives, work, environment, and relationships. Consequently, there have always been some who have tried to silence it.

Artists know the power of creating art that is directly sensual and erotic. They often do it precisely because it fights against the tyranny of delayed gratification, of unfulfilled needs—a repression at the core of capitalist society. But within the art world, work often becomes explicitly and provocatively sexual because artists assume their audience is composed of moralists who are offended by sexuality and who therefore need...
to be shaken up. Artists rarely imagine an audience actually hungry for real sensuality and receptive to all its possibilities—an audience with whom it would be a challenge to communicate. Were they to make work with such an audience in mind, art might be able to fulfill the types of demands Marcuse has presented. Indeed, instead of being sympathetic to the anxiety produced in viewers when their work violates conventional expectations, artists at times opt for the easiest form of provocation—the sexual or pornographic—and then become hostile and confrontational when their work elicits extreme reactions because it is in fact upsetting to its audience. The result is alienation between the audience and the artist. Perhaps this is the manifestation of a larger issue, namely, that the artist has forgotten that the oppressive forces he or she is battling are not necessarily embodied in the individual viewer. They are, rather, embedded in the social system, which not only refuses to make a place for the artist within society but also refuses to recognize the real concerns of human well-being. Were artists to actually imagine their viewers as real people in need of positive stimulation, perhaps their intent would be more deliberately to engage and provoke rather than to shock.

"Art for the People"

The appropriation, pastiche, and at times parodic cynicism that characterized the postmodern period have left a vacuum. Curiously, it now seems that the pendulum has swung fiercely in the opposite direction: There is almost the sense that artists "should" serve as social workers, moving in unfamiliar communities and making work that talks to and has meaning for people other than themselves. Certainly, this turn of events could be useful, but more often than not these ideas have become demands placed on artists by other artists for whom making politically correct work is a moral issue.

Surveying *The Aesthetic Dimension*, it is clear that Marcuse has given a great deal of thought to this kind of mandate. On the other hand, Marcuse is dubious about anything that might come across as "art for the people." He fears a too-deliberate type of populism would diminish and dilute the impact of art, which must help develop "a new morality and a new sensibility." However, "the more the exploited classes, 'the people,'
succumb to the powers that be, the more will art be estranged from ‘the
people.’” The more alienated people are from their own deepest selves,
the more fragmented they are from the society in which they live and
work, the more they need an experience of art that is powerful—yet the
more they might turn away from it, because the deep concerns such art
elicits could seem too remote and obscure to touch their daily lives.
Therefore, it often happens that the audience most in need of such work
might reject its content or find its form unattainable. Nonetheless, exces­
sive attempts to suit the work to the audience can defeat the necessary
tension that actually allows work to be subversive.

Marcuse’s position on this issue shows a clear understanding of the
contradictions in which artists find themselves. His willingness to con­
front these ambiguities is a trait often lacking in the critical thinking of
the art world today. The contemporary approach tends to encourage art­
ists to make work with a strong political orientation and then rewards
that work in art-world terms of success even though it has no impact on a
larger arena. Meanwhile, work that is not overtly political but perhaps
deeply subversive is too easily dismissed and criticized for not extending
beyond traditional confines. Ironically, the success of art might be mea­
sured, not in how favorably it is received, but rather in how it is attacked
or ignored, how “other” it appears when measured against the predomi­
nant cultural values or, for that matter, the predominant subcultural val­
ues of the art world.

In a similar vein, Marcuse believes that even though the masses may
have increasingly bought into the prevailing cultural values which make
complex thought intolerable and fearsome, the artist should not be forced
to create art, or the writer to write, in a way that is easily assimilated by
an audience embedded in the dominant one-dimensionality. If “art can­
not change the world,” it can help to change “the consciousness and
drives of the men and women who would change the world.” It may ap­
peal to those who see through the veil of Maya, who move beyond the
myths of their own civilization. Artists can make a choice “to work for
the radicalization of consciousness.” In Marcuse’s terms this might mean
“to make explicit and conscious the material and ideological discrepancy
between the writer and ‘the people’ rather than to obscure and camou­
flage it. Revolutionary art may well become ‘The Enemy of the
People.’” It may antagonize and confuse. Its ability to rupture continu­
ity may well be its strength, but it may be misunderstood, ahead of its
time, beyond its audience, even when its message is intended to liberate
those who passively ignore or actively oppose it. Its function is not to be
easily absorbed but rather to challenge and disrupt. We have certainly
seen this concept play itself out fiercely within the last thirty years. Art
that might have helped free its audience from repressive conventions was
met with great hostility by precisely those people who could have been
moved to greater understanding had they opened themselves to the possi­
bilities it offered. But the work was finally too unnerving to find accept­
ance in non-art world audiences.

In truth, even artists and intellectuals have trouble absorbing the
deeply controversial work of others or allowing multiple points of view to
coexist. Artists who make such work can deal with negative responses if
they accept the fact that they will face a certain degree of rage when they
challenge aspects of society that people have internalized as correct,
moral, and legitimate. They need to understand that there is a political
function to the uproar their work has caused. Too often success is mea­
sured by work “fitting in,” even fitting into the nontraditional world of
art. In fact, neither the dominant culture nor even the supposedly more
sophisticated subculture of the art world may be able to absorb the most
profound work produced, especially when the work refuses to tolerate the
politically correct line.

To make work too easily acceptable to an audience for whom the work
must inevitably be challenging is to homogenize the work and ultimately
to render it impotent. William Blake believed that his own poetry had to
be difficult to read, that it was in the act of struggling to understand the
text that transformations of consciousness actually occurred. To simplify
the effect, to translate the form, would have meant diluting the power of
the work to reach deeply into the psyche and challenge the values of soci­
ety at a fundamental level.

Within the notion of political correctness, there is often a desire to sim­
plify not just the form but the content of the work as well, to reduce it to
a message that can be easily “gotten.” This frequently results in a heavy­
handedness and an almost insulting condescension in the work that is
quite off-putting to the audience. “Getting” the message might not be the
problem; they may not like the message they are getting. It is also humili­
ating to the artist, whose function—unlike that of the television script-
The Aesthetic Dimension

writer, newscaster, journalist, cabaret dancer, or popular singer—may not be to seduce by entertaining. Perhaps one clear, significant role of the artist of the future is, as Susan Sontag says of her own intent, “to keep alive the idea of seriousness, to understand that in the late 20th Century, seriousness itself could be in question.”

Marcuse understood this aspect of art. Knowing the indigenous anti-intellectualism that progressive Americans have always had to confront, Marcuse was not sympathetic to any movement that forced art to serve the god of political correctness through oversimplification. He could easily see the limitation of this tendency and also the repressiveness of forcing artists into any one position. I think he might also have grasped the irony of the art world’s attempts to prescribe for itself what is legitimate, what work can and cannot be made, and how it should be made. Nor is it coincidental that this movement of self-regulation has followed so closely on the heels of a postmodernism in which artists isolated themselves from a more general audience. It seems a dramatic swing to err in the other direction, to overcompensate and in the process destroy, in the name of relevance and accessibility, what is uniquely important about art—its commitment to play and freedom of expression. This crisis of purpose is also a crisis of vision. Artists and writers, insecure about what art should be and how to justify its existence, attempt to impose a meaning on it from the outside in the hope that a set of political criteria will make art somehow more scientific, objective, and therefore more legitimate.

In the beginning of The Aesthetic Dimension, Marcuse notes that only radical political praxis can change the political situation and that his concern with aesthetics “demands justification.” If his final work retains nothing else useful for us today, it demonstrates the importance of aesthetics as an area of exploration and the importance of art as a crucial force for liberation within a repressive society. The debate Marcuse entered into almost twenty years ago is in fact still relevant and under discussion today. As the world artists live in becomes more complex, as the demands made on us all increase, his work on aesthetics can provide an endless source of inspiration, not necessarily for the answers it provides but rather for the range of questions it fearlessly asks. Postmodernism may well have changed the discourse and terms of the debate, may have introduced issues of identity, postcolonialism, and the notion of the disunified subject. But no matter. In this post-postmodern moment, as the
art world moves into the next decade in search of a meaningful identity, Marcuse's last book is still one of the finest justifications for the significance of art in society.

Notes

2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 6.
4. Ibid., 14.
6. Ibid., 66.
8. Ibid., 17.
11. Ibid., 49.
12. Ibid., 52.
13. Ibid., 7.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 66.
17. Ibid., 28.
18. Ibid., 32.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 35.