

## ARTISTS

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### Summary

The concept of an artist has changed radically in history and is substantially different from culture to culture. Parson has defined the role of the creative artist as someone who specializes in the production of new patterns of expressive symbolism, the performing artist is a person who specialises in the skilled implementation of such symbolism. The artist could be seen as a memorist, a visionary, a genius, as an artisan with special skills. The processes of creative thinking of artists and scientists have much in common. The artist in a clerical culture subordinates his personal creative activities to the tradition within which he is working.

His work is judged by a community according to the standards of this community, and gains prestige according to the principles of this community. The Romantic concept of art moves the interest from the work of art to the artist. Art becomes a form of therapy and the artist the mentor for life. The bourgeois capitalist world freed the artist from court and church servitude, but subjected him to the forces of the market.

Postmodern commercial and global society tends to see the artist again as essentially the entertainer, as the provider of certain consumer goods (books, records, films etc) or as the one who adds some beauty to an otherwise cold and commercialised life. Rebellious

against this image of the artists are the outsiders and the nomads of modernity and postmodernity.

## 1. What is an artist?

The processes of creative thinking of artists and scientists have much in common; there are, however, also distinctive differences. Feeling and individual expression are central in the pursuit of the arts; disciplined, logical thinking in the work of the scientist. Nevertheless both activities are clearly oriented toward a goal, and even the artist must submit to a discipline, and even the scientist cannot ignore intuitions, hunches, feelings and imagination.

### 1.1 Concepts of the artist in historical perspective

The concept of an artist has changed radically in history and is substantially different from culture to culture. The artist could be considered as somebody who keeps the memory of a society alive. (see *Memorists*) He can be perceived as somebody who has a special gift from nature, the spirits, the gods, and who is a visionary or a prophet, who could interpret the will of higher powers or who was the mouthpiece of the gods, reproducing what they were saying for his people. The artist's awareness of himself as a visionary and the acknowledgement of his function by his recipients (i.e., the public, the readers, the critics) may be traced back to ancient forms of religion as well as to archaic art, which was of a syncretic nature and combined ritual, magic and prophecy. (see *Visionaries*). The idea that all artists are mad, insane, maniac, is related to this function: he who speaks with the *manes*, the spirits, appears to be not in control of his mental function, something else seems to speak out of him. Ideas like these can be found to the present. Gottfried Benn devoted a long essay on the connection between hereditary mental illness and genius in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the first third of the nineteenth century psychiatrists, like the Swiss psychiatrist Walter Morgenthaler, conducted research on art works by psychiatric patients. The art historian and physician Hans Prinzhorn from Heidelberg gathered many and discussed these works in *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*). (see *Outsiders*)

### 1.2 The Romantic notion of the artists

Then again we have the Romantic notion, attempting to elevate the artist to his former glory of visionary, prophet or creative genius, the creator of a second world, vying with the first creator as a little God. Creators tend to play God games comparing their own creative work to the Act of Creation, the Author to the Almighty or renowned Creators. Leibniz (1646-1716) defined aesthetic act as a power "to produce something that resembles the works of God, on a smaller scale." The German philosopher stressed the fact that works of art must not be "mirrors or images of the universe of created things... but also images of the Godhead itself... capable of imitating certain elements of 'the system of the universe in the form of architectonic samples, each mind being like a little Godhead in its own compartment.' Art is to man what the creative power is to God. (see *Creators*).

Friedrich Schiller saw in art a repository of values otherwise lost: "Humanity has lost its

dignity, but art has saved it and kept it safely in important stones; truth continues to live in illusion, and the original image will be reconstructed from the reproduction.” The artist, therefore, is for him the custodian of humanity’s original values, lost in modern society. Art can heal human beings torn into the two halves, sensuality and reason. Art thus is also criticism and expression of the alienation of modern man, and the artist reminds us that we could live differently: I, too, was born in Arcadia, in utopia, in that place where there is no alienation, he seems to say. And it is my function to remind you of this. The artist has the function to dissolve the dissonances of everyday experience. In this way the artist and his art have the function to reconcile us with the contradictions of being, the contradiction between freedom and necessity. The artist, committed to the eternal laws of beauty alone, becomes the creator of a “higher world”, in which the contradictions, the meaningless and the chance elements of reality are not allowed. Harmony and organicity are the key words of the canon.

The Romantic concept of art moves the interest from the work of art to the artist. Art becomes a form of therapy and the artist the mentor for life. Rahel Varnhagen, the center of a literary circle in Berlin at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, elevated the German poet Goethe into a cult figure, who influenced everything in her life from the organization of her everyday duties to her perceptions and feelings. She experienced Goethe’s work and life as a unity. He appeared to her and her circle as the originator of a higher form of conducting one’s life, a secularized religion of humanity, who has given meaning and coherence to the disparate events of life. Conversely, protestant priests in Germany in the 19<sup>th</sup> century used the works of Schiller (rather than the bible) as texts for their preaching, preferring the “beautiful humanity” of German classicism to Luther and St. Paul. Comparably great achievements in less "individualistic" cultures have not produced any similarly powerful notions of genius.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century this concept of the artist experienced a serious crisis. The aestheticism of this trend in modernism forced the artist to attend to the medium more than to the content. The crisis expressed itself in Mallarmé’s inability to complete his poetic main project, Valéry’s inability to write for two decades, and the Lord-Chandos-Letter of Hofmannsthal. Art became problematic in the moment in which it had thrown out everything which the artists considered to be alien to art. Having retreated to a position where it became clear that such a “pure” art no longer had any function in society, they suddenly found themselves in a crisis where art itself became questionable.

Walter Benjamin described this crisis as the loss of the *aura*. The aura can best be described as the inapproachability of the work of art, its quasi-hieratic status, stemming from the origin of art in cult and ritual, which remains even in non-sacred art, and which of course defines the position of the artist as well. The loss of the *aura* derives from the change in the techniques of reproduction. Auratic works of art depend on categories like uniqueness and authenticity. But modern forms of art like the film exist only as copies. Because of this the entire character of art changes and the status and position of the artist with it. The new forms of art no longer require the contemplative reception characteristic for the bourgeois individual, but the distracted (*‘zerstreute’*) and critical reception characteristic of mass audiences. Benjamin introduced the concept of “allegory” (as opposed to Goethe’s concept of “symbol”) to characterise “Baroque” and

“modern” art. Of course, they do not have the same function in both historical epochs. But in both cases allegory takes a fragment of reality out of its relationships, isolates it, and takes away its function. The allegoric artist then takes these fragments and puts them together to create a new meaning. This process of modern avantgarde art has also been described as montage (especially in film and the visual arts). Outstanding early examples in film are Eisenstein’s *Panzerkreuzer Potemkin*, in the visual arts Picasso’s *Nature morte* (1912) or the photomontages of Heartfield. Literary texts like Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris* and Breton’s *Nadja* can also be seen as using the montage technique.

Georg Lukács saw the avantgarde as an expression of the alienation of human beings in modern capitalist societies, but also of the blindness of these artists to the political and economic causes of this alienation. But for Adorno avantgarde art is the only authentic art in a late capitalist society. Many of the avantgarde artists themselves began to deny aestheticism and individual production. Duchamp in 1913 signed and sent a mass-produced urinoir to an art exhibition. His signature indicated that on the art market the signature of the canonized artist counts more than the value of the art object. His ready-mades are no longer works of art, but manifestations. In the meantime manifestations like these have become integrated into the art market and no longer function as protest. Similarly the provocations of the dadaists cannot be repeated today as provocations: the art consuming public has in the meantime accepted that provocation is part of the game, and except for a few very conservative politicians nobody is provoked anymore.

### 1.3 The artist as craftsman

Against such exalted concepts of the artist we can hold the idea of the artist as a great craftsman or artisan, or maybe just an entertainer: *Kunst kommt von Können* – the German word for art is supposed to be derived from the word for ability. The creation of a work of art is the bringing about of a new combination of elements in the medium. The elements existed beforehand but not in the same combination. That is true of creation of a scientific theory, too.

The literary arts are less associated with manual labour than the visual arts, and the sculptor or painter has been generally more easily and closely associated with manual craftsmanship. The composer of a musical work of art is seen to perform a more "spiritual" role, while the performer has been frequently seen as more of a "craftsman." In the theatre, the actor is a physical labourer, but in so far as he acts out "spiritual substances" he is seen as a „creator“. This is one reason for the ambiguities in the social treatment of the actor.

Painters and sculptors in folk art usually make use of materials which are readily available, like wood, iron, clay, straw, ice, sugar, or use an old board as canvas. They usually have little motivation to employ a special technique: Folk wooden sculpture may be carved in a manner suitable for granite; painting may be done in an approximation of embroidery technique; pottery may bear incised patterns borrowed from metalwork or basketry; and almost any material is apt to be disguised under bright colours.

The artist in a clerical culture, be it Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem etc., subor-

ordinates his personal creative activities to the tradition within which he is working. His work is judged by a community according to the standards of this community, and gains prestige according to the principles of this community. Most of the time, the clerical artist (for example, the medieval manuscript illuminator) is submissive to the discipline of the moral community of which he is a part, but, in the conception of the artist as a civilized servant of a higher moral purpose, there is, at least, a potentiality of criticism of the organization to which he belongs.

The conception of individual authorship began developing in Greece around 700 BC and in China more than 1,000 years later. It was known in the medieval West and India, but the notion of individual authorship remained undeveloped in the Byzantine civilization. In modern times, when the special ability and authority of the artist was considered elitist, the slogan "Everyone is an artist" was used to demystify the concept of the artist. Joseph Beuys developed the theory of so-called "social sculptures." He objected against art being created and measured strictly by formal and esthetic principles. Instead, art was to him an integrated process of perception and insight, a process in which everyone should participate. His slogan was: "Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler" ("Everyone is an artist."). (see *Outsiders*)

Postmodern commercial and global society tends to see the artist again as essentially the entertainer, as the provider of certain consumer goods (books, records, films etc) or as the one who adds some beauty to an otherwise cold and commercialised life. Rebelling against this image of the artists are the outsiders and the nomads of modernity and postmodernity. (see *Outsiders, Nomads*).

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### Biographical Sketch

**Peter Horn** studied German and English at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1971 he graduated Ph.D. from the University of the Witwatersrand with a thesis on "Rhythm and structure in the poetry of Paul Celan", and was offered the chair of German at the University of Cape Town in 1974. From 1987 to 1990 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and from 1993-1994 Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University. He was president South African Association of German Studies (1989-1997), president of the Institute for Research into Austrian and International Literary Processes (Vienna) (2001-), on the executive committee of the Elias-Canetti-Gesellschaft, the National Executive of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) (1991 - 1992), the National Executive of the South African Writers' Association. Besides he was Honorary Vice President of the National Union of South African Students (1977-1981), Trustee of the South African Prisoners' Educational Trust Fund (1980-1985), and a member of the Interim Committee of the Unemployed Workers' Movement (1984/5). In 1974 he received the Pringle Prize of the South African English Academy for an essay to the concrete poetry, in 1992 he received the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (Honourable Mention for *Poems 1964-1989*), and in 1993 the Alex La Guma/Bessie Head Award and in 2000 the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for the short story collection *My Voice is under Control now*. In 1994 the University of Cape Town granted him a Honorary Fellowship for life. Two of his volumes of poetry and numerous other publications by him were banned for possession during the Apartheid regime. His poems are anthologised in most major anthologies of South African poetry, and more than 100 have been published in journals. He has published numerous contributions to academic books, learned journals, and reviews and review articles.