Introduction: The Politics of Representation

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Few relationships would seem to be more stable than that between the arts and culture. Not only is there an ingrained notion in the Western tradition that there can be no culture without art and vice-versa, but also—in the form of rituals, monuments, anthems, and mythology—the arts in effect are generally perceived to be the repositories if not the constituents of a culture's identity. Cultural revolutions are invariably artistic revolutions, and colonies remain colonies until they produce or reclaim their own indigenous art.

Culture, however, is not the same as "a culture"; the former is a disembodied and superordinate concept, whereas the latter is specific to a certain time and place, as well as being tied to a multitude of other groundings. At the same time, it could be said that the unspoken agenda of every culture is its aspiration or pretense to the larger abstract sense of the term. Certainly this is the secret of imperialism, and a similar type of globalism and universality seems to be implied when critics invoke the adjectival form: cultural force, cultural criticism, cultural values, and even cultural diversity. Although such politics complicates matters for the arts, it also provides them with their perfect exercise

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field—the space or gap between the two levels or meanings of culture—just as it is by capitalizing on their traditional reputation as non-partisan, cosmopolitan, and "classic" that they are able to play the game of culture so well.

Sometimes, of course, artists are quite open about their agendas and able to negotiate quite well across the terrain, and actually there is a long history of artists who have been interested and/or involved in politics. Significantly, almost all of the "canonical" authors fall into this category, and today to a certain extent political engagement seems almost to be a prerequisite for artistic status. Similarly, in recent years there has been a spate of performers who have functioned not merely as "cultural ambassadors" but as mayors, senators, and indeed as President, with the late Sonny Bono—himself a product of the 1960s cultural revolution—playfully explaining his preference for the political stage in a 1996 address to the Washington Press Club on the grounds that "in show business, unlike politics, you have egomaniacs, power mongers and elitists."

In this context, debates about the institutional support of the arts, as well as those about censorship, require a slightly less idealistic lens from that through which these topics are frequently viewed. In particular, the following questions might be asked: is the artist different from other citizens, and if so how? should the artist be supported because he/she has a political agenda or because of the absence of one? was Marx right or wrong in aligning the arts with the "superstructure"? what public responsibility is entailed in accepting taxpayers' money? should support be based on need, qualifications, or merit? should applications be subjected to an "ethics" test, as in the case of much other funded research? has the case for the arts been strengthened or weakened by the current breaking of the "canon" and the broadening of the concept of art to include virtually any form of activity which designates itself as such?

In addressing such issues, we also need to bear in mind that insofar as the essence of the arts is "representation," all artistic expression is a political act: politicians represent their constituencies; artistic depictions equally "stand for" something or someone, even when they do not overtly focus on a society and its members. Certainly, the political dimensions of representation were at the heart of Plato's quarrel with the arts; similarly, such issues were central to pagan/Judaeo-Christian wars over true and false "images," and replayed again in terms of the Protestant Revolution, and today we find them in the frequent outcries against would-be fictional depictions of racial and ethnic groups. More subtly, if structuralism was overambitious in its attempt to discover the

"universal" code, it did alert us to the linkages between the various systems operative in a given ethos, enabling cultural and comparative studies of the zeitgeist kind in which the structure of a work of art is read as a reflection of the structure of the artist's society. Undoubtedly, albeit ironically, it is also this kind of linkage that makes it so difficult to determine whether "postmodernism" should be viewed as a period designator, as an artistic style or technique, or as the *slogan* of liberal pluralism.

Nor does the political aspect disappear when one turns to questions of the relationships between the arts themselves, for insofar as the arts are different sign systems how they are perceived as relating frequently functions as an index to how one perceives relations within a society or at the international level. It was, of course, G.E. Lessing who best articulated this dynamic when he employed an extended political analogy in arguing against any merging of the arts:

> Painting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbors, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other's domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders, and effect a peaceful settlement for all petty encroachments which circumstance may compel either to make in haste on the rights of the other. (*Laocoön*, Chap. 18)

In suggesting that different nationalities had different artistic talents, Lessing also anticipated the kind of artistic stereotyping that characterizes many tourist brochures these days, but most importantly he alerted us to the way that the different art forms are aligned with different segments of a society and accordingly how seemingly innocent arguments about the respective merits of the different media encode issues of power and hierarchy.

Thus on a very large scale, for example, one might consider what value systems or race/class biases underlie assumptions about which artistic mode or medium is most reflective of the sophistication of a culture and most conducive to shaping public opinion, especially since it would seem to be precisely in this area that one can locate the root of what is perceived as the cultural crisis of our times: the way that literacy, frequently invoked as the hallmark of the civilized, is being threatened by visual modes, specifically television, movies, and the computer screen. Actually, though, the Western tradition has always privileged sight over all the other senses, thus leading one to wonder if a certain amount of "literary" self-interest might inform the fears of educators about the devaluation of the printed word.

Less obvious—because it seems so obvious—is news-reporting, where the power of the word versus the power of the image is contested not merely in

discussions of which has the greatest impact in photo-journalism (and its poor cousin, the tabloid, or its satiric sibling, the cartoon) but also in whether appearance or voice is more important in the case of t.v.'s "talking heads." Similarly, in the case of that most definitive mode of culture enshrining—history—Thucydides was only the first of many concerned with whether "actions speak louder than words," and accordingly with how such deeds should be recorded, with the relative merits of showing versus telling, narrating versus quoting, composition versus temporal sequence. The same concerns, as W.J.T. Mitchell has observed, can be seen to inform the rival versions of the French Revolution advanced by Edmund Burke and Tom Paine, and today they are reechoed in Hayden White's theorizing about whether one can escape the "frame" of a "masterplot," as well as being more concretely addressed in the attempts of war correspondents like Michael Herr to come to terms with the official printed version of the Vietnam War versus the "graphic" experience of those who were there. As Mitchell has also observed, such interarts politics is also the subtext in Burke's evaluation of the differing merits of the American "written" and hence "visible" constitution, and the British oral and common law form. And of course in every law court today one encounters a weighing of the scales between visual and verbal evidence.

Ultimately, however, no activity—no mode of witnessing or reporting—is quite as political as interpretation, just as no critical activity is quite as ideological as theorizing. Clearly conscious of this situation, each of the essays in the present collection makes a concerted effort to conjoin generalization with specific examples—"culture" in the abstract with a focus on "a culture." Thus one essay (Gauch) addresses how issues of representation are enacted in the context of postcolonial Tunisia, while another (Rubins) problematizes prevailing assumptions about ecphrasis by analyzing how this method was used by early 20th-century Russian poets. Focusing on the same historical period, another essay (Sternstein) identifies the distinctive contribution made by Czech artists to the graphic "liberation" of the word that characterized the general European avant-garde. Bringing aesthetic issues closer to home, in a very literal sense, another essay (Watson) explores how "artistic" became a class signifier in 19th-century France, and how it was used by interior decorators to market their services. Adopting an intercultural approach, two essays explore the export/import dynamic of artistic exchange: thus one (Hamilton) examines the way that music *and* musicology were used as instruments of imperialism in the Victorian period, while conversely another (Chiba) discusses the way that British and French artists welcomed Japanese art as a way of freeing them from their own aesthetic traditions. Viewing artistic issues in a racial context, another essay (Rubenstein) examines the way that African Americans invented "jazz" to express their lost heritage, only to have this music appropriated by white culture. Focusing on the Canadian scene, another essay (Grace & Haag) undertakes the difficult challenge of showing how "classical" (instrumental) music approximates and collaborates with other arts in defining this nation's identity. Finally, in daring to address the way that interarts strategies are currently employed to protest the current military and "monologic" dictatorship in Nigeria, another essay (Oha) demonstrates not only the importance but also the dangers of drawing attention to the politics of representation.

Collectively, these essays also raise and invite further speculation on three related issues: first, is a multi-media aesthetics the necessary correlative of democratic principles, and if so, is this the kind of art most entitled to institutional support? second, should the dynamic of a mixed-media mode (and cultural diversity) be dialectic or dialogic? and third, if the arts are representative of the culture of a nation and play a role in international politics, then should the Olympics not also include games of this kind?