

# Introduction: Being Different

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Ever since Plato raised the issue, there has been a suspicion that the arts are somehow at odds with the well-engineered republic, whether in the sense of making no practical contribution or being downright subversive. Conversely, of course, there is the Shelleyan view that the arts are vital to civic well-being, that the artist is someone who either brings order out of chaos or provides visionary direction for a culture. Despite their opposed attitudes, however, both traditions tend to share the belief that the artist is somehow different from other citizens—a difference that is conceptualized temporally in the phrase “ahead of the times” or spatially in terms like “marginal” or “outside the mainstream.” In turn, to social theorists with a Hegelian bent, this very difference constitutes the element that paradoxically brings the artist back into the system, for if structure needs anti-structure—as critics like Mikhail Bakhtin and Victor Turner argue—then daring to be different may be the artist’s major social function. Viewed from this perspective, far from being the “machine in the garden,” Milton’s Satan was the artist in Eden, and *Paradise Lost* is as much about the dynamics of social structuring as it is about the founding or fall of the first society.

In the 20th century, however, a nexus of factors has made being "different" less easy than it might seem and perhaps more difficult than it was in the past. First there is the way that industrialization—in the form of what Walter Benjamin called "mechanical reproduction"—has diminished the possibility of uniqueness that at least relatively is a feature of difference. Similarly, the extent to which such replication has turned art into a commodity and ownership into a status symbol means that aesthetic issues are now squarely within the mainstream of a market economy. And, of course, within the artistic community itself, various forms of unionization have had a homogenizing effect that in conjunction with the amassing of members is at odds both with notions of minority and marginality. It is, therefore, not surprising that critics like Fredric Jameson have seen an affinity between postmodernism and "late Capitalism" or that currently instead of being aligned with anti-structure, the arts might seem to be more a part of what Marx called the superstructure.

On the more philosophical front, the possibility of being different has also been challenged by systems theorists and those ascribing to a constructionist view of identity formation. For the former, a truly oppositional art is impossible, since there is no vantage point outside of the system from or within which one invariably operates, while for the latter, cultural coding precludes both agency and originality. And closely related to these arguments is the Baudrillardian view that our entire "reality" is a "simulacrum," so that insofar as the artist is a producer of illusions he/she is simply acting out what everyone else is doing.

Perhaps, however, the factor that has most made being different a difficult task is the psychological climate of our times, with its "politically correct" emphasis on permissiveness and accommodation. Today, the concept of "misfit" is ultimately reduced to a defect in our current vocabulary, which accordingly can be corrected by eradicating certain expressions and implementing others, just as the premium placed on deviance has made it a very fashionable way to be. In today's teflon world, in short, it seems to be less a case of "after such knowledge what forgiveness?"—as Eliot put it—and more a matter of "after such forgiveness, what transgressions are possible?" Or to do a spin on Stanley Fish's clever cautionary quip about the feasibility of interdisciplinary scholarship, one might say that "Being Different is So Very Hard To Do."

While such changes in "attitude" and circumstances of production should not be ignored, however, from another perspective what has changed is mainly how artists have positioned themselves in relation to the mainstream. For example, nothing quite so well illustrates the connection between structure

and anti-structure as the training in classical music that is the well-kept secret of many rock performers. Conversely, one should not ignore the considerable daring evidenced by the London Symphony in translating the music of Sting and others from "the far side" into a classical idiom. On both fronts, in turn, one might point to the betwixt-and-between status of rock opera, or to the marginal status that artists like Meatloaf or Leonard Cohen have been able to maintain. And how should one interpret the interarts/economics cross-over symbolized by the marriage of Paul and Linda McCartney?

Challenging the mainstream, moreover, can frequently involve a celebration of the ordinary after the manner of the romantics or 19th-century realists, but now with a focus less on the "lower-classes" than on the middle-class—the so-called bastion of structure itself—and with a view to foregrounding the dynamics of replication. Pioneering this kind of anti-structuralism, of course, was Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, while subsequently Donald Barthelme added a comedic touch with his exuberant lists of commodities/cliches, and Robert Kroetsch outdid the Bible with his "seed catalogs" and "studhorse" genealogies. Similarly, one could find few better current examples of immersion in middle-class values to the point of subversion than performers like that "material girl," Madonna. Consider, too, how various ways of being different are dramatized in a contemporary film like *The Dead Poets Society*, wherein one example of departing from the norm takes the form of an inverted Bartleby-like refusal to obey the command to disobey—thereby raising the question of whether adherence to the system might be more heroic and individualistic than any participation in group radicalism. Certainly this was also one of the "messages" of *Beaches*, as well as the ingredient which problematized any easy solution to the impasse at the conclusion of *The Remains of the Day*.

What constitutes the anti-structural gesture, then, is as variable as what constitutes structure itself, and one of the most productive features of the present collection of essays is the way they not only demonstrate the various forms which this dynamic can take but also draw attention to the paradoxical flexibility that is required of the artist who would "take a stand." Two of the essays, for example, address the question of what is "obscene." One of them (Morgan) explores how an artist's passion for his/her art might make the public display of it worse than any exposure of the physical body, and in the process the essay also makes us rethink what lies behind our desires to champion and exhibit the work of the "neglected." Focusing on the joint product of a visual and a verbal artist—both of whom deliberately cultivated

repulsiveness—another essay (Vanskike) locates the obscene not merely in the attempts to censure pornography but also in the intellectual attempts to redeem it through a dialectical philosophy of transcendence or reduction to a form of personal therapy. Also concerned with the “grotesque” body is another essay (Sterritt) in which, however, the dialectical is seen as the kind of ambivalence that characterizes the Beat writers and lent to their Stooge-like antics the kind of profoundly religious dimension that tortured a mystic like Artaud.

How writers enlisted popular music—by definition a mainstream commodity—is the concern of two other essays, both generally centering upon Modernism or the period most involved in the beginning of the clash of structure and anti-structure. One of them (Martin) explores the Anglo-American history of this music-fiction engagement, demonstrating how such “slumming” enables the novelist to be “realistic” but also how the changing tastes of the public mean that today’s avant garde can quickly become the romantic nostalgia of yesterday. Conversely, however, another essay (Hokanson) explores the way that be-bop/jazz has its own structure, one grown organically in the African-American vernacular, and that it is by tapping this source that poets concerned with voicing their roots can effect the most mutually productive conjunction of tradition (including their own) and the individual talent.

Conceptually, one usually thinks of structure in spatial and dimensional terms, just as nations frequently announce themselves in terms of their buildings and public art, and another pair of essays explores the topic from this angle. Thus in a kind of Canadian variation on the theme of nature/artifice, one of them (Regimbald) focuses on architectural art and photography, exploring the symbolism of such edifices and how “land/earth” art becomes a new site for the interaction between natural formations and manufactured constructs. In the context of a French/American mix of art and artists and real versus imagined exhibitions, another (Williams) examines the psychology of houses and dwellings, demonstrating how the empty room is an invitation to narrative occupancy—society, as it were—and how the imagining of the absent object lends itself to a cross-cultural transport.

A last pair of essays, in turn, directly addresses the question of difference and exchange in terms of the dynamics of metaphor and specifically with respect to the way that one aspect of a system can be converted into another. One of them (Morris) again touches on both the popular and the obscene in a discussion of whether and how boxing—an activity centrally concerned with physical combat—can be translated into something aesthetic and/or whether

the attempt to do so in visual and verbal art makes such artists themselves complicitous in the infliction of pain. Another essay, itself a collaboration (Herman and Lernout), focuses on the somewhat Faustian ambition to conjoin science and the arts in the encyclopedic novel, and wherein the project is seen to achieve its goal less in discovering or deciphering the “single” common code and more in generating other possibilities and reader participation.

Taken collectively, finally, what the essays in this concluding issue of *The Interarts Project* also suggest is that in the 20th-century the arts themselves have become so integrated that many of the questions which formerly characterized interarts discussions no longer seem to pertain. Thus while many of the essays do emphasize differences between the various media, the focus tends to be more on how the arts relate to social issues and the needs of the individual. Whether this is a wholly desirable situation, however, remains to be seen, and future interarts critics will need to address a series of interrelated aesthetic/ethical/technological questions: a) are we all born ambidextrous or is there an inequality in the way that talent in various media is dealt out, and if so can genetic engineering prevent such “natural” defects? b) if a catastrophe were to eliminate the technology that has facilitated the merging of the arts, would aesthetic segregation return? c) has the sense of difference between the arts really disappeared or has it mutated into other ways of distinguishing “us” from “them”? d) was difference between the arts never a real thing but only a make-work strategy devised by critics? e) is it critics who have turned their attention elsewhere, and more even than the general public is it academics who constitute the mainstream against which the artist must struggle? f) if it is ultimately the institutionalizing of art that plays the role of the “structure” to the anti-structural function of the arts, then might the converse not also be true? In the “performance” of “difference,” in short, how indeed does one “tell the dancer from the dance” or distinguish what Neil Diamond called “beautiful noise” from what Simon and Garfunkel called “the sounds of silence”?