

Artists and the Community: the Ethical Face of Aesthetics

Biography:

Anne Taylor recently completed a degree in Fine Art, majoring in art theory, painting and printmaking, and graduating with first class Honours and the University Medal from the University of Newcastle. She is currently engaged in postgraduate studies there. She has exhibited regularly since the eighties, with three solo shows and numerous group shows. Her most recent publication was a short story in the Newcastle University creative writing anthology, *Initio*, 2004.

According to Emmanuel Levinas, who, in *Totality and Infinity* situates being in our relationship with the other, the face of another opens the possibility of infinity.¹ In that possibility lies an obligation to curb the extravagance of solipsism and temper our acts with ethics. The face of another demands that we consider our actions in order to balance egoism with compassion. Levinas asserts, "The face to face is a final and irreducible relation which no concept could cover without the thinker who thinks that concept finding himself [sic] forthwith before a new interlocutor ; it makes possible the pluralism of society."² For Levinas the existence of alterity constitutes the dynamism of our being, and a resistance to totalisation.

But can an artwork exert the same compulsion to respond as a living presence? Can the inertia of matter subjected to the discipline of manufacture that constitutes art, whether valued or not, activate the same obligation as the face to face?

We apprehend an artwork largely through vision, in which Levinas finds a faculty for interiorising, so that forms become meaningful and are fixed in a signifying system. For him language operates differently, as a fluid and receptive exchange, through separation from the other who is a stranger, and as a consequence, free.³ An interactive view of existence calls into question selfish enjoyment or possession. Contemporary art takes on the condition of language, in its unpredictability, or opposition to tradition, while retaining some of the qualities of internalisation inherent in the image. Its purpose could be found in its oblique presentation of possibilities, and the interrogation of their consequences.

Paul Ricoeur detects a dual function of imagination; as recollection and as projection. The signifying images characteristic of a mythic representation can generate new meanings from within the layerings of the imaginary and the real.⁴ The proliferation of meanings grafted onto images constitutes a dialogue, and requires the completion of a response when manifested as art.

An expectation of familiarity and a lack of curiosity lead the casual viewer of art to reject work that is not immediately accessible. Normally this is attributed to the artist's incomprehensibility. Nevertheless, a responsibility lies with the viewer to make an attempt to absorb what the work may offer, as well as with the artist to be sincere in his or her practice. The preconception of art as providing passive entertainment precludes serious engagement. An implicit contract of communication must be acknowledged, with an element of teaching, on both sides. Such a contract should not be seen as onerous, but as a natural outcome of expression and response.

Levinas writes of "the teaching quality of all speech", in that we engage in interpretation, rather than passively absorbing information.⁵ The conditions created by the presence of an artwork also require interpretation, but of a less definitive nature. The dynamic established between art object, its environment and the viewer works to slow down time, suspending the urgency of quotidian concerns. In this pause, we may become aware of themes which intrigue the intellect and the senses, broadening experience through inference or poetics, without coercion. If the artwork touches us, an inner dialogue ensues, not only symbolic but also encompassing the body and the emotions. This is an interaction, not just of simple pleasure which immures subjectivity, turning it inward, but a communing exchange. As Levinas puts it "in language there is accomplished the intermittent afflux of a presence that rends the inevitable veil of its own apparition..."⁶ To engage with art is a more recondite dialogue than the personal encounter, but because it is deflected vision, transferred through a created object or situation, it can be absorbed and considered at leisure. The ethical relation is muted, but functional.

Turning to a specific work, Tim McMonagle's *Paragon*, 2002, oil on linen, an ethical dimension can be detected. Initially it seems neutral and withdrawn with flaccid forms drifting across a thin grey wash. The entities are created with negative space, sensitised by frail pencil marks and uncertain outlines. They hover like empty speech balloons, communication suspended, but sensitive to mood or nuance. Words do not manifest, but the entities are aware, watching with fine, oriental eyes. Their watchfulness interrogates us, as if thoughts were becoming beings, and the twisted tails of the largest entity creates an embrace, or an entanglement. The painting evokes an unstable, tenuous intimacy and the frailty of relationships. The thin paint clots in places, as if a more robust expressiveness was about to materialise. Such tentative moments are most sensitive to alterity.

Yet Levinas treats the image as a given, corresponding to an internal identification, and distinct from the expressiveness of the face to face encounter.⁷ He sees art solely as a materialist process, dedicated to an impersonal idealism.⁸

This is to limit the image to a representation of received concepts, rather than a dynamic exploration of correspondences between the self and the world. Contemporary artists emphasise this critical aspect of art by using devices to disrupt a literal reading. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, "The world no longer stands before him through representation, rather it is the artist to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible."⁹ The materiality of compelling artwork is

transformed into a dialectic between internal and external impulses, as much a dialogue as language, though less specific. The work of art is created with an awareness of its audience's intervention. It is a type of pregnancy, the physical vessel created in order to enact a multiple birth. The offspring are scattered in intangible fragments, carried by the awareness of those witness to an unfolding nativity. Such a dynamic participates in the pre-conscious or elemental side of subjectivity, with the same inexplicable intensity, if we allow it, as love. The enchantment of the artwork lures us to be open to its possibilities, extending its poetic force.

In his treatment of love, Levinas creates another elision, for he claims this as an inward-turning relationship, as if the lovers were identical beings, closed off from difference. Love is analogous to the natural elements in his thinking, where subjectivity is sealed in sensual enjoyment or necessity. He sees language as the originating function, beyond the mute world, and the passions as lacking in signification, and therefore separated from an ethical dimension.¹⁰ The elemental denotes an absence, a separation that approaches "the frontier of night."¹¹ No exchange is possible at the advent of the silent elements, nor in the vulnerability of clandestine, nocturnal moments that for Levinas describe love. He states, "The simultaneity or the equivocation of this fragility and this weight of non-significance, heavier than the weight of the formless real, we shall term *femininity*."¹² The feminine principle as a negative quality is also applied to the beauty of art, seen to be existence without foundation, and an inversion of the mystery of the feminine face. The image becomes a substitute without depth, an immobilising of possibility.¹³ In the secret rites of eroticism and allure, both art and the feminine lose their autonomy, for Levinas refuses them signification, and dissolves them into an impotent solipsism.

Why occlude the feminine, and deny art its expressiveness? The ethical relation can not belong only to the masculine, and language. An interpretation that is only applied selectively fails society, and denies the complexity of communication.

Luce Irigaray elaborates on woman's exclusion from philosophy in general, and from Levinas' *The Phenomenology of Eros* in particular. There the feminine is placed below representation, outside the masculine ideal which Irigaray states will never be accessible to her, and needs reinterpretation, rather than absorption into the status quo. In the face to face relation of sexual love otherness is afforded an ethical urgency through the necessity for a harmonious relationship which maintains a stable and flourishing community. Acknowledging women's autonomy ensures that the ethical dimension of sexual difference acquires a balanced and intimate base. The libidinal relation, in the physicality of the caress, becomes a bridge to the other, rather than a return to self. Irigaray describes the memory of touching as, "The memory of the flesh... that which has a place, has taken place, but has no language. The felt which expresses itself for the first time. Declares itself to the other in silence."¹⁴

The expressiveness of touch manifests in art, as well, as a synaesthesia detectable in the trace of the artist's process or spatial concept. The formal coherence of even the most conceptual work maps the pathways of the artist's intent in a communication deeper than language.

An elemental harmony manifests in Anne Juddell's work, *The Singing no. 9*, 1997-8, pencil, oil and wax on paper, where the intricacy of nature is translated into the sensitivity of fingertips exploring details of rock, bark or leaf; the delicacy of breezes playing against skin; or the shifting veils of mist obscuring a cliff-face. This series of works evolved from the landscape of the NSW Southern highlands, delineating its fluctuating light and atmosphere. The work could be a segment of a larger whole, continuing beyond its borders, as if to demonstrate the limits of human awareness. The fine and fluted volumes interlace in layers of transparent membrane, amorphous, but seeming to exist in symbiotic intertwining. As all nature is dependent on a balance for its flourishing, so human society is regulated by ethical choices applied to community and environment. The fragile networks and invisible currents of the senses and emotions operate alongside the symbolic and rational constructs of society, influencing the shape and direction of our lives.

To give recognition to qualities associated with the feminine, and so considered inferior, would encourage a wider and more inclusive range of experiences and concepts applicable in everyday living. The common perception of art as a useless luxury can then be transformed into a recognition of its complex and evolving questioning of norms. Ethics can consequently operate on a level that is inseparable from the sensations and affect of lived experience. Only experience can direct ethical choices, even if it is, as Levinas claims, that ethics precedes ontology.¹⁵

By allowing the ethical imperative of the other to be extended to the unveiled face of the feminine, Levinas' philosophy acquires a grounding in the familiar strangeness of love, and the surprising uncertainties of art.

ENDNOTES

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, The Hague, 1979, 79-81

² *Ibid*, 291

³ *Ibid*, 76

⁴ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, New York, 1998

⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 98

⁶ *Ibid*, 98

⁷ *Ibid*, 297

⁸ *Ibid*, 298

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, quoted in Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 125

¹⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 175-6

¹¹ *Ibid*, 142

¹² *Ibid*, 257

¹³ *Ibid*, 263

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London, 1993, 215

¹⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 201