PART I

IN FAVOR OF CONFRONTATION

KINSHIP CAN MAKE for trouble. This is true for the relations between the various disciplines of knowledge, such as the sciences. It is also true for the present interaction between psychology and philosophy, about which I wish to register a complaint in the following. To be sure, if one prefers to cling strictly to one's own specialty, one need not worry about contradictions between neighboring occupations. That, however, is a convenience one cannot afford if one is convinced, as I am, that one's own field of work and philosophy are inseparable.

For my purpose, philosophy is not a self-contained discipline; it is the crowning superstructure of efforts in the various fields of study to advance to ultimate principles. It is those principles on which the work of philosophy is based. And just as philosophy is threatened with sterility when it fails to replenish its resources from pertinent areas of knowledge, work in any specialty may succumb to narrow drudgery when it no longer focuses on the larger objectives that are the territory of the philosopher.

This symbiotic relationship seems to me particularly indispensable for psychology. Philosophy must refer to other sciences, such as physics or biology, when required by its particular tasks to do so. Psychology, however, is always involved in this symbiosis because philosophy deals with the mind and the mind is the subject of psychology.

Conversely, in my own work on the psychology of art, I find it hard to decide where, for example, my study of the artist's dealing with the world of reality trespasses on epistemology as a chapter of philosophy. Or, to pick another example, where does an investigation of the artist's moral

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obligations become simply an application of philosophical ethics? Similarly, my analyses of thinking turn without warning into matters of logic. Thus, by its own intrinsic dynamics, my work moves from specific observations to ever more general propositions and hence into a precinct of thought whose present rules of the game may not suit mine.

Empirical investigations in the natural sciences as well as in the humanities rely on certain axioms without which they lose their meaning. Their principal axiom affirms that the target of any acceptable inquiry is a set of objective facts that the researcher undertakes to verify and to explain. The indispensable assumption is that there exists a final truth about, say, the universe or a work of art. Regardless of whether researchers rely on quantitative methods of measurement and proof or on qualitative analysis, they are faced with the task of searching the objective facts by means of their own particular perspectives and resources.

It may seem that the artist is exempt from this commitment because there are as many ways of representing a fact of human experience truthfully as there are artists. Actually, however, the artist is no less obliged to do justice to the facts than is the scientist, except that the artist's own view of the subject is included in the conception to be represented. The arts, taken altogether, offer infinitely many aspects of the same truths, complementing rather than contradicting one another. Although the validity of an artist's worldview can be argued only in its own terms, it can, and must, be argued.

In practice, the commitment to this basic axiom is hardly in doubt. No science is conceivable without the assumption that facts exist objectively. What we cannot be sure of is whether our best description of a fact is correct and whether it is in our power to attain correctness. No honest scientist would have the courage to publish and teach were he not convinced that he was conveying the best approximation to the truth available to him. Nor is the situation different in the arts. I have yet to see an art historian offering an interpretation of a work of art without the conviction that what he is telling is objectively correct or at least deserving to be so considered. And any painter, sculptor, or instructor of architectural design criticizes the products of his students with the certainty of a person who is applying valid criteria with professional expertise.

So complex, however, is our present civilization that this indispensable foundation of our professional ethics is overlaid with a theory of knowledge that asserts the very opposite—namely, that there is no such thing as objective truth. This theory originates from philosophy, whose practice seems to preclude just such an assumption. Is it not true that philosophers are as obstinately convinced of the validity of their theories as are their

colleagues in the sciences and the arts? In fact, those who hold that there is no objective truth are among the most obstinate defenders of their own convictions.

I recently opened a book on philosophy and the mirror of nature, whose ideas I take to be symptomatic of today's philosophy, and I read that "the notion of 'accurate representation' is simply an automatic and empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us to do what we want to do" (Rorty, 1979). Further on, the book says that "we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation." And the upshot: "Once conversation replaces confrontation, the notion of the mind as a Mirror of Nature can be discarded." When I, an outsider, alight on the scene of today's philosophy and read such statements, I am seized by the suspicion that the work crew charged with erecting the edifice of our principles is infiltrated by termites. To judge by the standards in any field of research and education I am acquainted with, anyone who replaced confrontation with conversation in the manner recommended in the preceding quotations would deserve to be chased from his job for behavior unbecoming a seeker of the truth. And as for the doubts about the mirror of nature, I can do no better than quote Elsa Morante in her novel *L'isola di Arturo*. "I am reminded," she says, "of the fairy tale about the hatter who wept and laughed always at the wrong occasion because he had been made to observe reality only through the images of a bewitched mirror."

The approach illustrated by the aforementioned terrifying quotations has spread, like a cloud of poison gas, from philosophy through our intellectual world and, as I indicated, has even enveloped the theoretical thinking of many people who in practice do not doubt the validity of their own work. Perhaps it has aroused some sympathy in a population that has come to distrust the reliability of its political leaders. The young, in particular, are readily captured by an attitude in support of their skepticism.

But how did this pathology get into philosophy? If I am not mistaken, this view acquired its destructive power from the fusion of two influential trains of thought. One is the insistence of the British empiricists on accepting the reality of nothing but the most immediate and tangible evidence of the senses, which, for example, leads David Hume to say about necessity that it is "nothing but an internal impression of the mind or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another." And further: "The efficacy and energy of causes is neither placed in the causes themselves, nor in the Deity, nor in the concurrence of these two principles, but belongs entirely to the soul, which considers the union of two or

more objects in all past instances" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, part 3, sect. 14).

The other ingredient of this toxic philosophical concoction derives from the Continent and from an entirely different frame of mind. It claims the privilege of powerful individuals, and more broadly of human beings in general, to mold the world according to their own wishes and needs. The most eloquent promoter of this claim is, of course, Friedrich Nietzsche, who in *Der Wille zur Macht* has a section on the will to power as cognition [*Erkenntnis*]. There, inveighing against "causalism," he asserts that "truth," which he puts in quotes, is not "something that exists and is to be found and discovered but something to be created, something that provides a name for a process or rather for a will to overpower, which is actually endless" (*The Will to Power*, book 3, para. 552).

Evidently, this blend of a cognitive insistence on subjective perception as the sole generator of connection and interaction and the moral license to willful interpretation has had an irresistible influence on the mood of our time. In the art world, which concerns me particularly, it has led to a radical neglect of objective standards in at least two ways. First, an awareness is lacking that art fulfills particular functions for the human mind and thereby is distinguished from other occupations. Second, a widespread belief holds that the criteria by which one determines, intuitively or explicitly, whether a given work deserves to be held in aesthetic and social esteem no longer exist.

One can hardly blame an artist for proclaiming that art is anything he chooses to call art if the very people who are supposed to supply the standards by which to judge what is and is not art assert that there are no such objective criteria. This leads to a widespread agreement that anything goes, be it art or not, cheap or rare, profound or superficial, mechanical or creative. Undoubtedly, changes and innovations are taking place in artistic practice. But precisely for this reason, it is incumbent on us to recall the unique qualifications by which the arts promote the common good. Rather than indulging in the easy pleasures of relativism and answering with a superior smile when students ask what is meant by art, we should come forward and confront the issue.

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ART AMONG THE OBJECTS

Et l'on trouverait mille intermédiaires entre la réalité et les symboles si l'on donnait aux choses tous les mouvements qu'elles suggèrent.—*Gaston Bachelard*

WITH THE EMERGENCE of man from nature, art emerged among the objects. There was nothing to distinguish or exalt it in the beginning. Art did not separate one kind of thing from the others but rather was a quality common to them all. To the extent that things were made by human beings, art did not necessarily call for the skill of specialists. All things took skill, and almost everybody had it.

This is how an eighteenth-century essayist might have begun a treatise on our subject. By now, this recourse to a mythical past would sound naive and misleading, mainly because we have come to pride ourselves on making distinctions rather than on seeing similarities. Thus, art is laboriously separated from objects supposed not to be art—a hopeless endeavor that has increasingly disfigured our image of art by extirpating it from its context. We have been left with the absurd notion of art as a collection of useless artifacts generating an unexplainable kind of pleasure.

Rescue from this impasse in our thinking is likely to come not primarily from those of us who, established on the island of aesthetic theory and practice, look around at what else exists in the world but rather from those who, on the contrary, start from human behavior in its totality. These latter explorers are interested in what people are surrounded by, what they make, and what they use. In the context of such investigation, these explorers run into objects prominently displaying the property we call art. Psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists have been driven to view art in the context of nature, ritual, shelter, and the whole furniture of civilization. As a characteristic example I mention a thorough interview study, *The Meaning of Things*, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981), in which three generations of families from the Chicago area were questioned about their favorite possessions. Pictures,

sculptures, and all sorts of craft work turned up at a more or less modest place in the inventory of the home, and the reasons given for their value make wholesome reading for specialists in aesthetics.

As the subtitle of the Chicago study—*Domestic Symbols and the Self*—indicates, its authors were concerned mainly with the psychological questions of what those cherished objects did for their possessors, what needs they satisfied, and what traits they acquired by the uses to which they were put. This leaves room for further studies focusing on the nature of the objects themselves. Seen in the context of the rest of the world, what are the characteristics of the objects we single out when we talk about art? This, too, is a psychological question and is the subject on which a few observations are offered in the following.

Art objects, like all other physical things, are known to us exclusively as perceptual experiences—that is, as things we see, hear, touch, or smell. In this respect, no difference exists among a tree, a chair, and a painting or between the two ways we deal with these experiences. We can handle objects, as when we fell a tree or carve a block of marble or crate a painting; or we can contemplate them, as when we admire a waterfall or listen to a concert.

Likewise, the ways in which we initially come to know objects as independent entities do not differ fundamentally. Although we can influence the percepts of objects by handling them or by changing our position in relation to them, we learn soon that they have an obstinacy of their own. They cling to their place or move at their own initiative. It is the recalcitrance of the perceptual object's behavior that makes us experience the world as existing independently of our own selves. Psychoanalysts have taught us that this realization causes a traumatic shock, which is overcome only by a considerable cognitive effort. At the very beginning of life the infant has to cope with the illusion of what Donald W. Winnicott (1971) has called the primordial omnipotence of the self. Gradually the infant learns how to come to terms with the other wills, embodied in living and nonliving things—a task made easier by the assistance of "transitional objects." The thumb, the teddy bear, and the blanket are called transitional by Winnicott because they are more readily at the beck and call of the child than other things are. They also begin to acquaint him with the limits of his power. They will do some things for him but are unable or unwilling to do others.

The problem survives through everybody's lifetime, and a scale of compliance develops that reaches from the most amenable objects to the most unconquerable. On this scale, somewhere between a kid glove and a Tibetan mountain, lie works of art. It stands to reason that manmade things

are among the most obedient, but it is also true that our acquaintance with the nature of physical materials teaches us to be patient with the limits of the service to be expected from tools and furniture. Wood will not bend, and water will not stay put.

The maker of practical implements therefore conceives an object he plans to make in terms of the materials of which he will make it. Given his knowledge of what suits the material, he generally is able to predict the outcome of his work. The mental image guiding him in the making of the object tends to be reliable. There are few surprises. That is, normally the mental goal image of the work, the realm in which the maker's imagination rules with complete freedom, is not frustrated by the physical materials through which the conception is carried out.

In the arts this gestation process tends to be much less smooth. The goal image, to be turned into physical existence, is much less prescribed by convention; at least in our particular civilization this is the case. Therefore, the goal image tends to be less explicit, less finished. Quite frequently, it is not really available before realization. Rather, it comes about gradually in interaction with the medium. The image proposes, and the medium reacts, not always favorably. It makes objections but also suggestions and offers surprises. The artist has much to learn about getting along with the materials of his trade because nowhere does the infant's initial illusion of omnipotence seem to survive more naively than in the artist's trust in his own power. As the uncontested sovereign in the realm of his imagination, he finds it all the more difficult to cope with what Sigmund Freud called the reality principle. Works of art are the adult's transitional objects par excellence.

Hence the characteristic struggle of the artist with his medium, the exasperating discrepancy between the work as envisioned and its realization in the "flesh." The sculptor argues with the wood or stone, the dancer with her body. Trying to get around the problem by contending, as some aestheticians have done, that the mental conception of the work of art, uncontaminated by its material embodiment, is the true work seriously misrepresents the situation. The incarnation of the artist's vision, his version of the Eucharistic miracle, is an indispensable value of his work.

Through the struggle with his materials the artist comes to realize in a particularly dramatic way that the experiences we call physical objects are anything but inert matter. They are vehicles of their own behavior, embodied initiatives, and only when their dynamic nature confronts us actively are we likely to notice them explicitly. Martin Heidegger, in his essay "Das Ding" (1954), points out that in the European languages things are closely related to causes, *chose* or *cosa* to *causa*. In the same vein Hans-

Georg Gadamer (1976, p. 69) refers to the kinship of *Ding* and *Sache* in German. Objects are things that concern us in the original Latin sense of *objectum*, that is, of things thrown into our way as obstacles or signs, forbidding or inviting, calling for response. And soberingly enough, language defines the counterparts of objects as subjects, that is, as what is passively subjected to the things. This linguistic hint tells us that we are what we are by what we are subjected to. And the material things of our environment symbolize these counterforces most impressively. This insight was given most tangible artistic expression by the early filmmakers, who knew that their medium converted the props of the setting, immobile on the theater stage, into actors. The film mobilized the furniture of nature and the manmade environment by focusing on the items, giving them entrances and exits, making them approach or recede, and varying their appearance as demanded by their roles in the plot.

What character traits enable objects to play their active part? Remember that in the artistic practice of the last few centuries the objects populating paintings and sculpture and even architecture and the performing arts have lost much of the broader environment with which they used to interact. Within a single painting, to be sure, the figures of a dramatic scene, the apples and bottles of a still life, or the shapes of an abstract composition respond to one another; but the frame is the limit of this small world. The work of art has become a mobile facility belonging nowhere and ready to be put anywhere. Its effect on its surroundings is accidental, and the surroundings' influences on the work are unpredictable. Compare this vagrancy of paintings in our time with the established place of the mosaics on the walls of a Byzantine church or the stained glass windows of a Gothic cathedral, where the pictures were indispensable components of their setting and received their meaning from their setting. The same is true for sculpture, music, buildings, theater, and dance. By now, the single art object, instead of being supported in its particular function by its place and time, is expected to carry a total and complete message against the opposition of an incongruous neighborhood.

To properly view this special and in some ways pathological state of affairs, we have to take off from the more normal situation in which objects, whether natural or manmade, are components of an integral environment and have to be seen in that context. Under such conditions, the total space in which these components operate is primary and dominant. In the practice of daily life this setting acts as a pattern of constraints and offerings, such as a path in a landscape, the streets in a city, the walls and the doors. Only secondarily is this "life space," as psychologist Kurt Lewin

(1935) has called it, broken down into a configuration of objects, each endowed with its own messages.

Lewin defines the behavior of objects as their valence or demand quality (*Aufforderungscharakter*). Naturally, to call forth human responses, objects must be known and understood, and the perceiver must feel the urge to approach or avoid them. As Freud has remarked, "But if I have a path open to me, does that fact automatically decide that I shall take it? I need a motive in addition before I resolve in favor of it and furthermore a force to propel me along the path" (1943, p. 43). Even so, the perceiver experiences the attractions and repulsions as issuing from the objects themselves.

In their most radical social manifestation, the motivating forces of objects are revealed by the pathology of what Karl Marx refers to as the fetishism of merchandise. Recently, Gaspare Barbiellini Amidei and Bachisio Bandinu (1976, p. 24), in what they call "a disquieting investigation of our captivity among the objects," have derived from the Marxist concept an analysis of traditional and modern attitudes based on this observation: "Il fatto è che le cose parlano e che gli uomini parlano attraverso le cose" (the fact is that the objects speak and that people speak through the objects). I shall refer later to this book but will cite here a striking illustration of its thesis in a short novel, *Les choses*, by Georges Perec (1965), which describes a group of Parisian students in the 1960s. Employed by market research agencies to trace the responses of customers, these students are themselves hopelessly addicted to the lure of objects offering comfort and prestige. "In their world it was almost the rule always to desire more than one could acquire. This was not of their own making, it was a law of the civilization, a given fact most aptly expressed in publicity quite in general, the magazines, the art of window display, the spectacle of street life, and in certain ways even in all of what goes by the name of cultural products" (1965, p. 44). The novel opens with a long, ghostly panorama of a dream apartment filled with all the luxury objects of enviable living, an assembly of silent sirens, each displaying its seductive charms, but all this in the total absence of human beings. This description presents valence in the abstract, attractiveness as such.

It is particularly pertinent to the valence of art objects that so many of their properties inviting response are directly contained in their perceptual appearance. Lewin speaks of forces going out "from a sharp edge, from a breakable object, or from the symmetrical or asymmetrical disposition of objects on both sides of the path taken by the child" (1935, p. 50). Another psychologist, James J. Gibson, has elaborated somewhat on the description

of the perceptual qualities that invite action and has given them the name "affordances" (1979).

The basic affordance of a work of art is that of being readily perceivable. Because the human senses are geared biologically to the apprehension of relevant signals, a bugle tune, a fire alarm, or a piece of music detaches itself from a background of noises by its definable tones, and this comprehensibility arouses in the hearer the urge to respond. Similarly in painting, sculpture, or architecture, the orderly visual structure of shape, size, and color in a well-made work attracts viewers through its immediate readability. This primary affordance gives access to all the obvious allures deriving from the subject matter of the work and the various personal associations that may bind the consumer to it. In the most general sense it is the very order and harmony of its appearance that distinguishes the art object as an oasis in a disturbingly chaotic world. And this organized perceptual structure enables the art object spontaneously to illustrate definite constellations of forces that underlie physical and mental functioning in general. The purified experience of such basic dynamic themes as harmony and discord, balance, hierarchy, parallelism, crescendo, compression, or liberation is an affordance of fundamental cognitive value.

What I am describing here as the principal affordance of art is not lost when the range of the artistic statement is limited to the confined, isolated, and mobile object, which, as I said, has come to be so characteristic of our particular culture. In fact, such confinement can be said to enhance the compositional unity of the work. Take the highly expressive qualities of spatial distance. Within a painting, distances between objects are strictly determined by the meaning they convey. For example, in Georges Seurat's *Afternoon on the Grande Jatte*, chilling gaps keep the figures at a psychological distance from one another. As soon, however, as we step beyond the frame of the painting and consider the canvas as an object in the physical space of, say, the museum gallery, the distance of the viewer from the painting becomes as arbitrary as is the total setting of the works of art kidnapped and stored in a neutral space. Compare this with a defined architectural interior where the particular nature and message of a picture or statue are meaningfully determined by its particular place and distance from the various functional features of the building.

In a very broad sense, Heidegger, at the beginning of the essay cited previously, deplores our losing the meaningfulness of spatial and temporal relations. The relation that used to distinguish close by from far away, present from past, has been leveled by modern technology to a uniform optimal distance. Heidegger asserts that this practical convenience has destroyed true "nearness" between the viewer and the object viewed. His

observation reminds us that in an undisturbed spatial and temporal context, the variety of distances symbolizes degrees of belonging together or being remote. One is close to a lover but distant from a judge, close to one's workshop or away from home.

The more the work of art is isolated from its setting, the more it is singularly burdened with the task it used to share with its total environment. Here again a reference to Heidegger is illuminating. He expects a humble water jug to reflect nothing less than the cosmic quaternion of heaven and earth, the divine and the mortal. More modestly, we may be willing to limit the symbolism of the jug to the humanly relevant activities of receiving, containing, and giving (Arnheim, 1966, p. 192). But even this smaller request insists on "making the objects speak." Gadamer (1976, p. 71) has observed that any talk of "respect for things" has become more and more unintelligible in an ever more technological world. Things, he says, "are simply vanishing, and only the poet still remains true to them. But we can still speak of a language of things when we remember what things really are, namely, not a material that is used and consumed, not a tool that is used and set aside, but something instead that has existence in itself."

Fortunately, respect for the things made by humans for humans is not entirely limited to the poets. If, however, we want to observe objects in their full involvement with man's daily existence, we must have recourse to one of the few communities left in which the users of tools are not yet separated from their makers and the shape of objects still reflects the way they were made. Barbiellini Amidei and Bandinu, in the book I mentioned earlier, offer a moving description of one of the most primitive populations left in Europe, the shepherds of the Barbagia plains on Sardinia. Their simple huts are equipped with two kinds of objects. A few are gotten in town and have to be paid for. "Not being natural objects, they are not protected by nature: they are always in possible danger and may suddenly refuse to function." All the other objects are made by the shepherd himself of granite, wood, hide, bone, or cork. "They don't cost money nor can their price be translated into working hours." Making them emerge from nature "is never a chore, even though they serve practical needs; in making them there is always an element of playfulness. They are essential but replaceable, and their presence can be invented at any time. The things of nature offer themselves as materials. Therefore the attitude is not one of anxiety but of trust, almost an affectionate carelessness. [The shepherd] treats them as he pleases because they are his, and he understands their course from life to death" (1976, p. 68).

All these tools and implements are carved and kept in good shape with the knife the shepherd always carries in his pocket. There is a closeness

between making and consuming that most of us rarely enjoy. There are no paintings on the walls of the shepherd's home, no objects that specialize in providing images of distant worlds, but there is a family resemblance between the utensils and their makers because the objects reflect the style of life of their users. Having been made the right way from the right materials, the objects reflect standards of honesty and solidity for human conduct. They are guiding images leading the thoughtful mind by the symbolism of their appearance to the foundations of life and behavior. They do so without giving up their primary location as tangible agents in the world of bodily action. Their intimacy with the setting in which they operate as companions of their users makes it easier for them to be handled as well as seen and heard.

In a world like ours in which objects, limited to practical function and endowed with artificial values, no longer speak, works of art require a special dispensation to do their duty, and their users have to be awakened for a couple of hours at a time to be able to look and listen. Whereas more normally it is the eloquence of the objects that makes art possible, our hope for reviving the objects now comes from the arts.

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