



## SUNFLOWER SEEDS

*When art seems very far from the urgent cut and thrust of daily politics, that's exactly the point.*

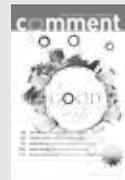
By Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin

What good does the artist contribute to society? Well, if you believe Oxford professor of literature John Carey: not much. As he argues at length in his book *What Good are the Arts?*, there are “no reliable connections at all between artistic appreciation and [moral] behaviour,” and any evidence that “exposure to certain kinds of art makes people better . . . has to date proved elusive.” Carey makes one exception—and that happens to be his own field, literature, on the grounds that it contains ideas and so can be self-critical.

Carey’s book, not surprisingly, provoked extreme reactions ranging from “brilliant” and “erudite” to “idiotic” and “taxi driver bollocks.” At least it put the question on the table.

Posed abstractly, the question “what good does art do?” is of little use. Not only is there a vast range of artists—singers, graphic designers, cellists, movie directors—there is also a vast range of opinions as to what might constitute the “good” or a “good society.” Plato’s idea of a good society was profoundly different from Rousseau’s; Sartre’s was very different from Adorno’s. Not surprisingly, their

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respective ideas about art and its contribution to society also differed widely.

Although Christians also take different views on these questions, there are some recurrent themes. Most Christian views of “the good society” are likely to include some reference to justice, peace, the common good, and human flourishing. Although the meaning of such terms is disputed, here I will assume that Christians do have some sort of shared vision—a *sensus communis*, if you like—as to what they mean by a “good society.”

Yet what is the artist’s contribution to such a good society? One of the pitfalls of Romantic and post-Romantic thinking about art is to conceive of the artist as the solitary, isolated individual standing *over and against* society, rather than as a full-fledged member of society. In this view, the artist is assumed to live on the fringes of society, to survive on a minimal income, and to



work under highly unstable conditions. He is both admired as a visionary rebel and indulged as an *enfant terrible*. Neither of these attitudes of social exclusion—marginalisation or exaltation—have done artists much good. Instead, they have only added psychological insecurity to financial insecurity.

Let's ask ourselves what it is that makes the artist get up in the morning. Sometimes it is the pull of the work itself. When things go well and she feels "the flow," there is a pleasurable creative energy and harmony between the self and the materials, a give-and-take dynamic which makes her forget time and feel a sense of contentment. But more often than not, such a flow is absent. Art can be a struggle and a challenge, a journey littered with obstacles and frustrations: the resistance of the materials themselves, lack of concentration, lack of time, lack of commissions, lack of money, all of which converge to produce an even greater lack: lack of confidence. It is at times like these—when things are not going smoothly, when there is little productivity and no affirmation—that artists not only begin to doubt themselves, to ask whether they are, after all, any good, but they also begin to doubt the whole enterprise of art itself.

This is when an artist begins to ask whether it's all worth it, whether art *does* matter. Is it still possible to believe in a vocation for which there seems to be so little obvious need and which seems to have so little direct impact? If we think about the overwhelming issues of our time—acute poverty, the

ecological crisis, ethnic violence, financial meltdown, war—isn't spending so much time on a particular dance movement or the exact nuance in a sculpture a bit futile, an indulgent hobby providing a temporary escape from the "real" issues of human life? Shouldn't the artist be doing something more useful and constructive with a more tangible result? Is he merely re-arranging the deck chairs on the sinking Titanic?

Even a poet like T.S. Eliot experienced occasional doubts. Reflecting on the relevance of poetry in the early years of the Second World War, he wrote this to his friend, the theatre director E. Martin Brown:

In the midst of what is going on now, it is hard, when you sit down at a desk, to feel confident that morning after morning spent fiddling with words and rhythms is a justified activity. . . . On the other hand, external or public activity is more of a drug than is this solitary toil which often seems so pointless.

It may surprise some non-artists that doubts like these are entirely familiar for people involved in the arts, and not only in times of war or crisis.

So what *is* the good that the artist contributes to society? Is it entertainment or education? Cultural conservation or social critique? Or is art merely, as increasingly seems to be the case, a marketable commodity—a source of investment, a tourist attraction, a cultural export? Even governments are confused. What department should house the arts? Should they fall under the Department for

Culture, Media and Sport as in the U.K., or the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, as in the Netherlands? Or should responsibility for the arts be handed over to an independent body such as the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts and therefore not involve government intervention at all (until, of course, some “transgressive” exhibition generates a public outcry)?

### SHAPING PUBLIC DISCUSSION

Perhaps one way to get at the question is by looking not at *what* the arts do in society—after all, they can do a wide variety of things—but at *how* they do it. *How* exactly do the arts contribute to human flourishing? What shared and unique feature allows them to fulfill their distinctive tasks?

In her book *Philosophical Sketches*, philosopher of art Susanne K. Langer, too, asks the question “What does [art] contribute to culture that could be of major importance?” Her simple reply is this: “It merely presents forms—sometimes intangible forms—to imagination . . . [It gives] form to inward experiences and thus make[s] them conceivable.”

After his moments of doubt, T. S. Eliot, likewise, came to a similar answer in *On Poets and Poetry*:

We may say that the duty of the poet, as poet, is only indirectly to his people: his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and

improve. In expressing what other people feel he is also changing the feeling by making it more conscious; he is making people more aware of what they feel already, and therefore teaching them something about themselves. . . . [He] can make his readers share consciously in new feelings which they had not experienced before.

This may not immediately strike us as making an overwhelmingly important contribution to a good society. Yet, in some difficult-to-define way, it points us to the irreducible gift and glory of art. Artists, individually or collectively, articulate how

*It falls to art to maintain an open space for alternative values.*

humans sense and feel the world in ways that both reflect and shape the public imagination. The arts bring to our consciousness vitally important import matters that elude discursive language.

Politicians are beginning to catch on to this, too. In a stimulating debate organized by the British newspaper *The Guardian*, entitled “Politics versus the Arts: which has the real power?” it was suggested that, since professional politics was becoming more and more remote from the public, the most pressing issues of our time were finding expression in art.

The immediate occasion for the debate had been the installation piece *Event Horizon*

by Antony Gormley, at that time on display across London. Gormley's trademark practice of placing castings of his own body in unexpected places—this time on the rooftops of London's highest buildings on both sides of the Thames, thereby eerily altering its skyline—had, as always, proved a lively conversation piece. People were engaged and puzzled, talking about the strange figures looking down on them. Some years later, Gormley produced another talk-of-the-town installation, *One & Other*, in which he invited the general public to occupy the Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar Square—a place normally reserved for statues of kings and generals. People signed up in advance for hourly sittings. Some of the participants chose to simply sit, while others created their own performance pieces. It went on for 24 hours a day for 100 days, creating widespread discussion as well as entertainment. In *The Guardian*, Madeleine Bunting said this about the “Gormley-factor”:

Art can never do the messy business of politics—the negotiation and compromise. But . . . art can open minds and change hearts in a way that our politics is singularly failing to do. . . . Leftwing local authority council leaders, property developers—these were the types that once dismissed art as an unnecessary and frivolous accessory to the business of relieving poverty or making money. Now both constituencies are falling over themselves to commission the Gormley factor. Council leaders talk as earnestly these days about “place shaping” and the

“narrative of place,” as they once did about fighting job cuts.

Gormley himself offered this insight during the debate: Since post-ideological politics have become increasingly remote and management-like, it falls to art to maintain an open space that allows for the generation of alternative values. Art *shows* what politics can only *talk* about.

Admittedly, not all contemporary art is as public and as publically accessible as Gormley's. One of the recurrent complaints against contemporary art is that it has alienated itself from the general public, thereby disabling itself from contributing to reflection on the good of society. It is indeed true that overly obscure and pretentious art, and overly obscure and jargonistic art talk, have contributed to a yawning gulf between contemporary art and the general public. The resulting mystification of art has also contributed to its commodification. Because contemporary art can no longer readily be appraised in terms of its artistic and aesthetic value, the market has stepped into the void and bestowed on it monetary value. Art has become another stock to be traded on the market in the fickle world of supply and demand. Artistic success has become equated with market price and the precarious status attached to it.

For T.S. Eliot, it was essential that art was not so obscure or private as to lose touch with its public. Mere eccentricity or expression of private feelings, he said, does not guarantee good art.

[There] is a difference between the writer who is merely eccentric or mad and the genuine poet. The former may have feelings which are unique but which cannot be shared, and are therefore useless; the latter discovers new variations of sensibility which can be appropriated by others. And in expressing them he is developing and enriching the language which he speaks.

Eliot encourages the poet—and, by implication, any artist—to explore new artistic languages (“variations of sensibility”) in such a way that they connect with shared experiences. For artists wanting to make a contribution to the good society, his words should be salutary.

Fortunately there are many examples of artists who, while being wonderfully creative and thoroughly innovative, are able to create a strong connection with the audience they aim to reach, even across national borders. To give one example: Ai WeiWei, arguably China’s most famous and politically outspoken artist and recently released from 81 days in solitary confinement following an arrest on spurious grounds, filled half of the vast ground floor of London’s Tate Modern last year with one hundred million tiny porcelain sunflower seeds, hand painted by local craftspeople in the Chinese city of Jingdezhen. It had taken 1,600 people two and a half years to manufacture and paint the seeds. From a distance it did not look like much—a featureless, outstretched sea of uniform grey in the already drab and

grey environment of the Tate’s huge turbine hall.

Yet, as observers came closer, they were able to see how each tiny little seed was carefully crafted and decorated. As a result, they gained a dramatically different perception of the whole work. *Sunflower Seeds* was originally meant to be walked upon, but safety issues caused by the dust coming off the seeds unfortunately made that impossible. Yet, it was clear from the solemn response of the public to the work that this did not diminish the impact of its evocative symbolism, providing numerous narrative layers of meaning—not only about the social order of China, but about human society in general.

Art does not have to be “political” to be socially relevant. When *Life of Pi* author and 2002 Man Booker Prize winner Yann Martel found out that Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper had, literally and figuratively, no time for reading—Harper had once quipped that his favourite book was *The Guinness Book of Records*—he took action. For over four years, since April 16, 2007, Martel has been sending books every two weeks to Harper, accompanied by an inscription and a letter sharing his thoughts on why the book was worth reading. These regular parcels are an attempt to introduce Harper to the richness of literature and to invite him to make time for stillness:

To read a book, one must be still. To watch a concert, a play, a movie, to look at a painting, one must be still. . . . Life,

it seems, favours moments of stillness to appear on the edges of our perception and whisper to us, “Here I am. What do you think?”

One might counter that if Harper had been reading a novel every two weeks he would not have been able to get on with the important business of governing, but Martel disagrees:

I don't care if fellow citizens read or not; it's not up to me to say how people should live their lives. But I believe people who lead should read. . . . If literature does one thing, it makes you more empathetic by making you live other lives and feel the pain of others. Ideologues don't feel the

pain of others because they haven't imaginatively got under their skins.

Professor Carey is right that there is no direct connection between the appreciation of art and improved moral behaviour. Yet, as Martel highlights, art does allow for those necessary moments of self-reflection and attention to the lives of others. Sunflower seeds, stillness, the nurturing of empathy—these all seem a far cry from the urgent cut and thrust of daily politics. But that is exactly the point. In the artistic imagination, we are invited to stand back and reflect on the way we sense and experience the world—on our place in God's *teatro mundi*. Let that be art's contribution to a good society. 



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