

## COMMUNICATION AS INESSENTIAL TO ART

I wish to suggest that the concept of communication, as we take it in life, is not really essential to art; and that it perhaps even falsifies what art is. I do not deny that the concept is important. It has been so in the history of aesthetics, and also in what may be called the philosophy of education. Thinkers have looked upon art as a means of bringing us all a little closer together, and even as a way to propagate some basic values — moral, religious or merely humane.

But consider what such thinking implies. It makes two assumptions: first, that art is a kind of *language* and can, therefore, function as a means of communication; and, secondly, that the usefulness of art lies in its commitment to meet the moral and religious needs of society at large. Such at least is the view of Tolstoy in whose well known work, *'What Is Art'*, 'communication' is the key word.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper, however, is not to examine Tolstoy's view of art, in particular. What I propose to do is rather something general: to examine, at some length, the view of art as a kind of language; and further, to show what difficulties arise from using the term 'communication' in relation to art.

A normal instance of communication implies two things: (i) the separability of *what* is communicated from its medium; and, (ii) a deliberate intention behind (or before) the act of communication in respect of the nature and meaning of what is communicated. The latter is conjoined with the idea of unrelaxing control over what happens in both the creation and contemplation of art. Let me explain:

Consider, for instance, a letter which communicates a message. Obviously, what the letter does is *merely* to convey the message; and, after it has done so, it ceases to have any further value (except perhaps in cases involving some legal matter). Quite often, we even destroy the letter after

appropriating its message; and as we do this, I may add, the message itself remains quite unharmed. Contrariwise, the message may not be clear or complete even when the letter is received and remains quite intact. On such occasions, we may need clarification and ask for what the writer really intended to say.

*Such* need and concern, it is clear, presuppose that what is sought to be communicated is always fully intended, more or less clearly. It is indeed a precondition of successful communication that what is sought to be communicated is clearly visualized and formulated *before* the process of communication is set afoot. But for this, how could it be possible to communicate *the same* message over *different* media — like teleprinter, telegram and the radio — and may be in different language without any loss of meaning?

(It may here be protested that the specificity of the means or medium employed in such cases is very likely to affect what is communicated. To this my reply would be that the change that can here occur relates not to the message as such, but to the way it is received by the addressee. Thus, as against the content of a letter, a telegraphic message *seems more urgent to us*. I must here add that, in everyday communication, even this impression of urgency is intended, and in that sense preplanned.)

I can indicate one other way to focus, in respect of all communication, the relatively definite nature of the content (or message) and its separability from the medium of communication. It is quite normal to get our *own* communications corrected, modified or amplified *by others*. This is possible just because language is used only as a tool which merely conveys, and must faithfully transmit *what I intend to communicate*.

And now I may turn to protest. If this is what 'communication' is and implies in everyday life, can art at all be regarded 'communication' in any acceptable sense of the word? I do not wish to deny that *some* art may be said to *communicate* this or that idea. (This seems specially true of

artistic prose.) My concern is rather with questions that are at once more basic and general. Can communication be regarded as a defining characteristic of art? May this question be answered affirmatively from the viewpoints of artistic criteria, excellence and experience? Is it demanded by the very concept of art that it should communicate?

Before I can attempt to answer these questions, some general remarks on the nature of art, its making and experience are likely to be of help. Art has been defined in very many ways, and people have objected to the very possibility of art's being definable. A part of this turmoil, as we are told today, is due to a lack of clarity as to what exactly the term 'art' is meant to signify, — the object of art or the process of its being made. Now, though I concede that the clarity in question is quite necessary, I must hasten to add that rigid adherence to any one side would only hinder access to the rich and varied spirit of art. Surely, the work of art cannot (with impunity) be considered in total isolation from the process which precedes and brings it forth. (A birth is a bliss *because* of the antecedent labour.) The creation of art is of course not identical with the way we contemplate or judge it. But a consideration of the art process can give us helpful insights for a proper understanding of our experience and evaluation of art. I indeed believe that all talk about communication as the essence of art has to heed the two viewpoints: that of the work of art and that of its *making*. Further, we have here to reflect along two main lines of inquiry:

- A. *What* does art communicate?
- B. And, if it is true that all art communicates, what exactly is the *manner* of communication?

The latter may be put as a *philosophical* question.

What does it *mean* to say that all art communicates?

In answer to the first of these, we may say that art communicates ideas or feelings. We shall have occasion to deal with this reply, later. At the moment, however, let me deal with the second query. *How* does art communicate?

Can ideas or feelings be communicated without the artist's having intended to do so? Does the painter have (or formulate) some *definite* ideas or feelings before he sets out to make a painting? Here, we must turn to the evidence of fact, to the actual situation of a work's being created. Most modern painters would say that they didn't quite know what exactly they were going to paint. At any rate, no artist would hazard the remark that he had fully visualised, in all its minuteness, what his painting was going to be like. The painter may well feel some kind of an 'urge' or 'itching' before he begins working. But, between this 'blind insistence' and the finished work the whole creative process occurs; and this is a process of struggling to find what would really satisfy — and so is rarely, if ever, foreknown to — the artist. It is, further, an activity during which he is often only led by the suggestiveness of that itself which he is able to realize, piecemeal, on the canvas rather than by any choice of his own. The process is, in short, quite unpredictable. This is indeed why it consummates in the artist's delight of discovering himself in his work.

If we compare all this with the features of everyday communication, the following *differences* emerge:

- (i) Quite unlike communication, art is gratuitous.
- (ii) A prior and clear formulation of what exactly is to be conveyed characterises communication, but not art, generally.
- (iii) As a natural corollary to (ii), no two works of art can be the same.<sup>2</sup> Further, whereas ordinary communication is repeatable — and also translatable into different languages — art recalcitrates all this. What is implicit in my argument here is the widely shared view that a far greater measure of freedom and spontaneity characterizes the creation of art than is provided for in the notion of mere communication.

Here, however, I foresee some protests. May not art be both free and a way to communicate? Admitting that

I am free *while* creating — and not at all determined by a pre-fixed intent behind the *act* of creation — could it not yet be held that *the work* (as completed) is communicative of, say, some feelings? To this my rejoinder would be roughly as follows:

If the work is believed to *convey* a message or meaning with effect, what, I demand, may be said to happen *after* the supposed communication has taken place? Does the work lose all significance, and so remain from now on? We must say 'yes' in case it is merely a way to communicate; for its function is now over. And we have further to say, what is clearly silly, that the mind can dwell on the meaning of a work as quite *disembodied* from its medium or material.<sup>3</sup>

I here feel impelled to buttress my argument with additional comment, in relation to painting; for, this is the art I am intimately familiar with. Consider any painting, of even fair merit. Do we put it away, or destroy it on the plea that we *have received* what it *had* to say? Do we not go to it again for a closer look, to *actively open ourselves up* to its magic rather than only passively receive what it is said to communicate? And do we not often seek to possess and cherish it, as we pay for it, as a perennial invitation to feel and imagine in ever richer ways? We do not merely hang it on the wall of our study; we commune with it. It is not without point that sensitive art lovers speak of a painting's 'interiority'. Even like a person, it needs repeated contact, intimacy, a sharing, even (I would say) an exchange of being. How otherwise do we explain the fact, known to most of us, that the self-same painting may at once *acquire* newer meanings and *reveal* new ways of feeling and imagining *in us*, and add ever *new* dimensions to our experience, on different occasions? A painting may be cherished as a lifelong companion and *never* seem stale.

It is this thought of its evergrowing — and may I say, liberating — impact on us that leads me to dwell a little more on art *as experienced*; and to heighten its contrast with a mere means of communication:

Considered as a norm, communication enjoins that there should be maximum correspondence between what is sought to be communicated at the source and that which is delivered or had at the receiving end. In other words, not only should the message as such be fixed and definite, but it should reach the receiver wholly unaltered. Now, if a work of art merely communicates something, do different persons receive the *same* 'message' from it? We must answer in the negative. The fact rather is that the self-same person may react differently to the same work on different occasions. Art indeed is no language at all. It is not, I insist, a system of symbols with fixed meanings; and is therefore unsuited to the ends of communication as commonly understood.<sup>4</sup>

Further, and this again is a known truth which 'the communication theory' does not provide for, both artistic creation and experience need imagination and perceptiveness in ample measure. A work of art not only liberates, but chastens and elevates the imagination. This it achieves by virtue of its insistence on freedom from preconceptions and set intent, and on an active openness to receive intimations of value in unsuspected ways. It therefore conduces to our growth on the inside. In communication, on the other hand, the ideal is to ensure that *nothing* is left to one's imagination, for the use of this faculty may easily alter the original intention. What here heightens the otherness of art from communication is the fact that the trained onlooker (or the *rasika*) may even be able to see such qualities in the work as go unnoticed by others, including the artist himself; and, what is more, be *commended* for such imaginativeness, — an attitude which communication wholly prohibits.

Finally, I turn to the question of the *what* of communication. What is it that art may be said to communicate? We may answer: ideas or feeling. Now, if we say that a painting communicates ideas, we at once invite the protest that this does not help us *distinguish* art from what is not art; for, things quite other than art (say, a letter) may also communicate ideas. The other alternative is to say that art

communicates feelings. But, to this my protest is ready and clear :

Consider two cases of communicating feelings. First, 'this letter communicates Arun's feelings of sorrow at the sudden demise of Karuna'. Second, 'of all his works, it is this painting which communicates sorrow best'. Now, a little reflection here brings out the following :

1. The letter purports to communicate somebody's (in this case Arun's) feelings and is specific in the sense of being caused by a particular mishap (in this case, the death of Karuna).

2. So, one would be rightly encouraged to ask, does the painting too communicate the feelings of the artist *himself*? To say that it does, would commit us to the view that the painting is a mere *carrier* of (individual) feelings, — a view against which I have already given my grounds of protest. If, on the other hand, the feeling (said to be) communicated is ascribed *only* to the painting (and, not to the painter), how do we ensure that a one-one correspondence exists between *this* and *my knowledge* of it? In such a situation, the cognitive role of art suggested by the use of the term 'communication' would require us to look for some criteria of testability and verification.

In the triple linkage of 'art', 'feeling' and 'communication', we may well be able to reach some agreement as to what 'art' is intended to designate; but any talk about 'feeling' in relation to art only gets muddled if we speak also of 'communication'. If 'feeling' is to be restored to its rightful place in the region of art, as made and as contemplated, I would suggest that we do away with the use of the word 'communication'. For, its use would suggest that in art *the same* 'feelings' are there as occur in life, whereas the need (on the other hand) is that we have to provide for the *distinction* between the two realms of art and life. How else can we ascribe 'feeling' to: the abstracts of Kandinsky, the pure space constructions of Mondrian (Victor Boogie-Woogie) or the rectangles and circles of Ben Nicholson

(Painted Relief), to give only a few examples.<sup>5</sup> Such works, to be sure, have a 'feel' about them; but to assert that they 'communicate' feelings would only be to commit the clear mistake of suggesting that the 'feeling' that they 'have' or 'give' is identical with feelings that we experience only in life.

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#### NOTES

1. 1896; translated by Aylmer Maude in 1905.
2. I shall not go into the question as to the status of 'fakes' and 'copies' of the original works of art.
3. I may here refer to the protest that Reid (L.A.), makes (though mistakenly), against Mrs. Susanne K. Langer's 'too sharp division between medium and creation'. *Meaning in the Arts*, George Allen & Unwin, London (1969), p. 83.
4. The distinction between presentational and discursive symbols has been well brought out by Mrs. Susanne K. Langer in her book *Philosophy in a New Key*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (1957).  
I am also aware that Gillo Dorfles insists that 'art can also be discursive'. *Communication and symbols in the work of art*. J.A.A.C., Vol. XV, No. 3, (March, 1957), p. 291.
5. The 'static' element in the works of the latter two artists can hardly be said to 'communicate' anything.