



—Majken Jacoby

# What's the Idea?

## The political work of art and the entanglement of ethics and aesthetics

*Majken Jacoby*

*We have an ineradicable propensity to schematic thinking, we divide life into clearly delimited areas, each assigned to its own discipline, and we let the disciplines have as little as possible to do with each other... when we spontaneously think in regions it is due to the fact that we spontaneously think only culturally. The areas are cultural areas and two of them are supposed to be art and ethics. But then we have just forgotten one thing, the most important, the fact that all culture lives off of what is not culture... the question raised by collocating art and ethics is thus finally: Is that, which is considered ethically evil and destructive also un-artistic? To this question I will answer yes.<sup>1</sup>*

*K. E. Løgstrup*

*When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without that flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it as it is and where it is—which is to say, beyond any any identical, specific place. I cannot say that the water itself—the aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element—is in space; all this is not somewhere else either, but it is not in the pool. It inhabits it, is materialized there, yet it is not contained there; and if I lift my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the web of reflections plays, I must recognize that the water visits it as well, or at least sends out to it its active, living essence. This inner animation, this radiation of the visible, is what the painter seeks beneath, the words depth, space and color.<sup>2</sup>*

*M. Merleau-Ponty*

### The politician and the artist

Recently, an art exhibition in Sweden erupted into an international political scandal. The exhibition took place as part of a conference on genocide, and the political establishment was invited to the opening. At the sight of an installation showing the portrait of a Palestinian suicide bomber placed on a small boat which floated in a basin of blood-red water, the Israeli ambassador got so furious that he tore down the spotlights surrounding the installation and threw them into the basin. The press was there on the spot and media from all over the world covered the story.

The ambassador maintained that he had the right to destroy what he considered not a work of art, but an outrageous anti-Semitic manifestation. The Swedish artist, himself Jewish, was of course furious: not only was he violated on a personal and artistic level, but the foundational principle of letting art express whatever it wants to was also challenged by such an act. The artist demanded that the ambassador must leave the exhibition, which the ambassador refused. Finally, after much tumultuous debating, he was forcefully escorted out by exhibition officials.

The incident caused a diplomatic crisis between Sweden and Israel, and the prime ministers of both countries supported their countrymen by throwing moral suspicion on the motives of their counterparts. The air was thick with self-righteous standpoints.

It was a farce. Nevertheless, the fury of the parties involved was real, and the eternal questions of art's relation to politics, society and ethics in general were once more turned upside down by the press and the involved parties. Should art take a political and moral stand and commit itself to specific ideas or views? Some of those who took part in the debating, but far from all, answered yes to this question, and it is a fact that much contemporary art gives expression to political views. Others maintain that art has to protect its autonomy and freedom from usefulness if it wants to keep its essential value.

Let me give another example of "political" art that gives rise to a somewhat different question: a group of Danish artists have started the production of soft drinks by using raw materials from Latin-American farmers. The production circumvents the all-dominating production structures of the big international companies, and the surplus sales are directed back to the farmers. The artists themselves distribute the soft drink, and, like the big companies, they have made videos for sales promotion in which the farmers present their product.

The question that arises is: what makes this alternative soft drink production *art*? The fact that the production team consists of artists? Where does the line fall between a political action—presumably carried by moral indignation—and an "aesthetic" work of art? Can we distinguish between the two?

The questions assume that ethics and aes-

thetics are separate areas and that they can be kept separate. The questions assume that they belong to different discourses, each with its own practical life. And that is of course true. Thyssen, a Danish philosopher, maintains that they are “neutral to each other—neither necessary enemies nor necessary friends. Therefore they can work together, not objectively, but associatively.”<sup>3</sup> Another Danish philosopher, Løgstrup, does not agree with this: if ethics and aesthetics are kept separate, both will lose their thrust.

While ethics finds its point of departure in human relations and then broadens out in many directions, aesthetics is usually understood as consisting of reflections on practices, theories and ideas concerning art. Furthermore, one of the more important areas of aesthetic discussion is concerned with placing the concept of art as such. The aesthetic discussion becomes a discussion of foundations. The fact that we, when confronted with certain works of art, have had long-standing difficulties in figuring out how and what to think about them plays an important role in aesthetic discourse. The example of the soft drink production illustrates this. But the turbulence surrounding the Swedish installation is also food for thought, and according to the Israeli ambassador this installation was *not* art, but propaganda and evil slander.

On the one hand, art allows itself to be used in favour of a specific idea, and on the other hand, it refuses to be the standard-bearer of well-defined attitudes and standpoints.

Pushed to extremes, art has no master. No specific area of life can claim it as its own. This is nothing new, and neither is the attempt new of binding art to an ethically “right” cause. Rather, it can be seen as one recurring attempt among many to give art a “master,” to directly define the scene upon which it ought to play and thus commit its questionable but nevertheless persistent existence to something beyond itself.

The situation is almost the opposite where ethics is concerned. We are all “ethically committed” as individuals and as members of different groups, communities, professions and nations. Ethics is something we *have*, or ought to *have*, something almost *owned*. Any area, professional or otherwise, has its ethical code. Any political party claims to stand on a foundation of values, these days often called *Christian values* (and in the light of the reality of so-called Christian politics, one can only be ashamed). In the commercial world, to *have* an ethical policy is part of product branding: ethics signals quality.

*Has art an ethics?* Hardly in the sense described above. But what does art *have*? How can we phrase the question so that it makes sense? It is incontestable that ethics and aesthetics are two different areas. Still, I believe they rest on a common experience: *the world calls and I respond*.

The “dialogue” between the world and the human being is open and infinite. A response to the world’s call has to be found anew each time. This is a heavy demand to place on us

and on our experience of reality, so habits and norms lend a hand, define the situation and supply us with suitable responses. Inner and outer responding-systems of all kinds see to it that everyday life functions reasonably adequately.

But the response of habit and norm is not always sufficient. It is challenged, and not least so in the encounter with art and with the other person—thus both ethically and aesthetically. The two examples of art given at the beginning are challenging, each in its own way, and we all remember situations where our preconceptions and habitual responses to other people were not at all sufficient in an actual encounter.

All things considered, habits and norms have a propensity to “break down.” The individual “system” of preconceptions may be challenged in such a way that a habitual response gets stuck in the throat. A similar thing happens to institutions of official opinion, even though their defenses against an onslaught are very much stronger. How do I respond to the photograph in the red basin-sea? How does the art institution look upon the soft drink production as a work of art?

The encounter of art and the other person can act as a disturbance. Whether what is disturbed consists of petrified habits or of institutionalized rule systems, they are at times confronted by something to which there is no quick and suitable response. And that is lucky. We live not only from what we know and understand, but also from that to which there is no immediate response, that which our understanding does not encompass.

The philosophers Løgstrup and Merleau-Ponty have both been intensely engaged with the aesthetic area, and I draw on their thoughts in the following. Both consider the aesthetic experience decisive to the human being, and both think that the arts have something crucial to say about the human condition. Merleau-Ponty is particularly engaged in the relation between sensing and thinking. He does not write about ethics: this

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is Løgstrup's domain, and if we follow Løgstrup, we arrive unavoidably at questions pertaining to the relationship between ethics and aesthetics and thus also at the questions raised by political art. Let us start by following the philosophers in their approach to *aisthesis* as that which revolves around sensing, in order to connect to art in its political shape.

#### To inhabit the world

Today, few dare maintain that the good and the beautiful, the ethical and the aesthetic come and must be thought of together. This is nevertheless what the American psychologist James Hillman does. "The thought of the heart" is our aesthetic response to the world and its events. If this response is blunted, "an-aesthetized," as he says, the world and we become not only ugly, but evil as well; the world appears as "...mere banality. The ugly now is whatever we no longer notice, the simply boring, for this kills the heart."<sup>4</sup> A dead heart can act atrociously.

In Hillman's view, we live off of the beauty that touches and breaks through the insensibility and efficacy of everyday life. Beauty makes the world real.

Such thoughts are close to how Løgstrup thinks, and although Merleau-Ponty never links ethics and aesthetics philosophically, he feels obliged to cry out to a world that ignores the foundational role of sensing. He warns against an overwhelming "scientific-

tion" of the human condition. It is high time we start to think, he writes around 1960, and think *differently*. We must test *other* ideas. If we ignore the state of the world and its insufficient or even dangerous thought habits, there is a risk that we "...enter into a sleep, or nightmare from which there is no awakening."<sup>5</sup> Both Løgstrup and Merleau-Ponty are deeply marked by the Second World War and the following years. The world is seriously out of order. Life is precious, and killing is the easiest thing.

We inhabit the world. "The world" is what appears right here in front of my eyes as well as what I imagine and think about it. Even if thought, imagination and sensing are interwoven in such a way that separating them is not possible, they all rest on what Merleau-Ponty calls "the primacy of perception." As sensing beings, we are intertwined with the world and each other.

We "inhabit" the well-known. Home is where things are as they were yesterday. The well-known becomes experiential patterns, which reinforce themselves. They become habits. My cup of tea usually stands *there*, and if I have placed a cup in which I wash my paintbrushes close to that spot, I drink from it. It tastes awful, but I do it more than once. We see and hear and act as we usually do. Sensing, or rather our interpretation of it, acts according to an established "convention." Habit decides how to respond, and this is a big relief in a complex everyday life. Imagine if we had to orient ourselves anew each time

we had to take care of the thousand things we do each day.

But habit comes at a price. The price of its convention-preserving propensity is loss of what falls outside its range. Habit bends into itself, follows its own rules, and rules can neither see nor hear. Rules relate “in general” to that which appears in front of one’s nose. Bound by habit, we rarely experience that which lies outside the order maintained by it unless the strange and different becomes so insistent that the order is challenged and “breaks down.” Tea tastes very different from water with paint. You are different from me, even though we are like each other.

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We have created the rules, but we are also created by them. We think and understand culturally, as Løgstrup says in the quote opening this article. Yet we exist in terms of the conditions of sensing, and sensing is “nature.” Indeed we are cultural beings through and through, and the ruling cultural order (in all its plurality) overpowers sensing to such a degree that interpretation and understanding cannot be separated from an imagined “pure” sensing. Nevertheless, the two philosophers maintain, thought and interpretation rest on a “nature” that is not culture. And in opposition to many later philosophers, they say that we have a certain access to this pre-cultural ground. When the usual way of relating to the world appears as insufficient and the language of understanding and meaning is replaced by silence, something appears that earlier on was hidden. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a pre-linguistic and immediate sense-understanding, which all later understanding arises from and is nourished by. The understanding of language then blends in and mixes with it. Still, sensing is the origin of language and thought.

Løgstrup agrees. He points to what he calls the sovereign or spontaneous life utterances, certain human experiences which can be found in all cultures and therefore cannot be considered as “social constructs.” The spontaneous life utterances catch us and throw us out into acts that are not grounded in rational reflection, but only have the “call” of the world and of the other person as their sole, immediate, sensible and “aesthetic” guideline. Love and hope are qualities which nobody can construct. They are given, and appear as gifts given by “life itself.”

To sense is to be entangled with the world. We cannot sense once and for all. To sense is to be actively involved, to be part of a “creation” that takes part all the time. Løgstrup says:

Outside our body, at a distance from it, soon close by soon far away is the music of the grasshopper and the cry of the swallow, but not outside and at a distance from our hearing. But the sensing person is not the grasshopper’s music and cry of the swallow! Well, that is as one sees it. The sensing person is not the originator, that is true, that is the grasshopper and the swallow. And when the sensing person can hear the music and the cry, it is because he is inscribed in the universe by his nerves and sense apparatus.<sup>6</sup>

Reflection and understanding push sensing to the background so that we believe it to be a mere circumstance of thought and speech. But sensing is fundamental in order to be able to maintain the understanding of language. The grasshopper’s music and the cry of the swallow make speaking beings of us.

The sensing (not the “I”) wants to “talk”; it wants to be articulated, says Løgstrup. Merleau-Ponty writes about “the desire of speech.” His argumentation and intention is different from Løgstrup’s, but his point is similar: without sensing, no language and no understanding. While Løgstrup considers sensing “incomprehensible” until language

and articulation take over and create a distance to the sensed, Merleau-Ponty maintains that sensing actually “understands” by means of its built-in ambiguity and otherness to itself. I am the object of my own sensing; I am both sensed and sensing—by myself and by the other person with the foreign gaze. Through this double condition, the speech and understanding of language emerges.

Understanding lives a self-fulfilling life of its own. Either the apparently strange is assimilated to a previous understanding, or it is ignored. Either I learn that the tea cup and the cup of painting water are two different things, or I will go on experiencing that for inexplicable reasons the tea tastes awful sometimes. This is, roughly, what Løgstrup calls living “trivially,” and that is how we live most of the time.

Sometimes, however, the triviality is challenged. Something breaks into my reality, and if my repertory of understandables does not supply me with a sufficient response, my understanding collapses. The dialogue carried by habit responds nonsensically to what appears senseless, resulting in disorientation. For a moment the world stops. What now?

This lack of orientation is also an opening. But an opening to what? The dialogue has to be re-invented, so to speak, because respond I must; I cannot help it. Not because a moral rule says so, but because it is a condition of living. Ignoring the situation by turning my back to it is also a response.

Any response is form and content, two sides of the same thing. Sometimes one side dominates and the other withdraws, but to separate them is not possible. Rather, they can be differently emphasized or switch places. Form becomes the content, or reversely, the content of the said overshadows the form or the *way* in which something is said. The artist knows this. Therefore, to call only the form or *way of responding* aesthetic does not work.

The form-and-content of my response is never given. To articulate it is my responsibility. It is my *responsibility* to give form-and-content to my *response*, and thus take care of that which appears in my life. The response is the way in which I take care of what I more or less accidentally encounter, and I can do that in two ways: either by mainly focusing on that out-there or by listening to that in-here—and for a moment ignore that these two points of reference cannot be separated either. In the few happy times when the positions spontaneously coincide, the response or utterance is perhaps what Løgstrup “invents” as a sovereign life utterance. With no ulterior motives and no deviation around thought, the response takes care of the demands of the situation. Essentially, Løgstrup says, this is an act of love. No recipe exists for such a response. It is risking one’s neck.

The response of the Israeli ambassador to the installation was to destroy it and accuse the artist of anti-Semitism: a rather alarming response. The response of the artist was to have the ambassador thrown out of the exhibition. The response of the prime ministers was to send notes to each other. The response of a Palestinian suicide bomber to her life situation was to make a living bomb out of herself and kill others. My response as media-audience was once again to realize how easy it is to take offence when challenged, and how difficult it can be to find any adequate answer in the face of hopelessness and despair.

The examples show that the aesthetic *responding* is entangled with ethical *responsibility*. Only in analytical reflection is it possible to separate them. Life calls and I respond. Call-and-response is not only a rhetoric

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or musical figure. It is also an existential.

#### Art and life

A work of art—if we assume that it exists without really knowing what it is—is not alive in the way a human being is. Still, they share conditions. Both exist on terms defined by sensing, and both live off of their communicative situation. They “talk” and want to be “talked to.”

According to the two aesthetic-phenomenological thinkers, the sense of sensing is language, everyday language as well as the language of art. Scientific language shares these conditions as well, but has “forgotten” it, and that is one of the dangers Merleau-Ponty warns us against. The scientific view runs the risk of ignoring the fact that it stands upon what is not science, the experience of *aisthesis*.

Everyday language and the language of art are not always easy to separate: the newer the work of art is, the more difficult it seems to be to distinguish them from each other. The play itself with the borders of language has become part of art-making. Still, Løgstrup and Merleau-Ponty both maintain that artistic language catches something that goes unnoticed by everyday language, and it is precisely this unnoticed *more* that makes *art* of art.

And the other person—does she bring *more*? In the descriptions of the effect of art and the other person, one is struck by the similarity of

the vocabulary: both are “ambiguous” in their expression, defying linear explanations; both are open to many interpretations. Any interpretation of a person or a work of art can, at best, only be partial, not least the interpretations that claim to catch the full picture. The encounter with art and the other person opens to disturbances and “ruptures” of pre-conceptions and opinions. Whatever the prevailing order might be, it is threatened by the actual encounter. There are always blind spots to any point of view—that is almost what defines a point of view—and if the perspective changes, something else will lie in darkness. Playing with the thought that “all” perspectives could be added to each other and provide us with a full, whole picture disregards the fact that the blind spots would multiply as well and that certain perspectives would cancel each other out or create non-sense together.

The encounter is a-systematic; systems of thought may reveal a great deal, but there will always be *more*. The encounter “scrambles the categories,” as Merleau-Ponty says. It creates disorder of my understanding and makes a mess of the ruling metaphors. This is because there is always something “strange” and “other” present, and this is what makes us see and hear in the first place. Indeed, this work of art looks like something I have seen before, particularly if I am an art historian trained in searching for the typical. But the typical is blind to what lies outside the type. This certainly goes for human beings as well as art. The other person is “another myself,” but he or she is just as much a stranger.

We live from the strange and disturbing. As necessary as habits are, so insufficient are they. Understanding is nourished by its cracks and crevices, because that is where the world sneaks in and says: there is *more*. That is its call. I will never get a complete hold of the situation, and if I did, there would be little left to surprise me. To master the situation may be the dream of “the conqueror,” the one who Løgstrup talks about when he says that “we walk over dead bodies to reach our goals.” Something keeps moving. The world shivers. Only dead bodies lie completely still.

How can I speak to you and how will you respond?  
Will you catch my speech “at the other end” or just stare at me as if I were an interesting insect?

Sometimes I must stand still and wait. This is the world’s most un-heroic response, but it may take courage. To respond is not to conquer. It is to make oneself available, also, and perhaps particularly, to what I do not understand: the strange, the stranger.

This is not a reasonable act. It is unreasonable to argue in favor of something one does not understand. But perhaps un-reason has its place. Perhaps it keeps the dialogue open and throws light upon the very nature of understanding, this intelligibility or understandability, which Merleau-Ponty maintains must be “thought anew.” Perhaps a seed to “thinking anew” lies in the entanglement of ethics and aesthetics, these areas or “world interpretations” (Løgstrup), which each live their own life, but live alone only with difficulty.

The political work of art is an example of crossing areas, and it may be impossible to decide where politics starts and art ends. If ethics and aesthetics co-habit, this is not the case with politics and art. They have a tense and, depending on whom one asks, an antagonistic relationship—unless you decide that “all art is political,” a slogan from my yo

other strategy is propagated, complexity is reduced, and I suppose this is unavoidable in politics and perhaps even helpful. It helps me to maneuver—irrespective of how much I may disagree with the chosen strategy and perspective. Art usually has a problem with this reduction, but we are moving in a grey zone. The examples of political art I gave in the beginning make this clear.

The problem is obvious when we think of political artworks of the more moralizing kind. They are “simply boring,” mere message and predictability. I may or may not agree, but I am not surprised. I have already understood the message. The more bombastic the message, the sooner I turn away. The work has lost artistic appeal, become “ugly.” The aesthetic reduction—not the same as a few colours and simple shapes—has turned art into preaching and better knowing, and who wants to listen to that for any longer?

And is not the case with the political action precisely the same thing? In order to work, must it not, like the work of art, “say” something I did not foresee? Must it not say more than what goes without saying?

When it is not possible any more to delimit a work of art from something else, a certain worry emerges on behalf of the future of art: is it dying? Is not the future of art glued to the existence of something called “a work of art”? Is it not decisive, then, that we be able to dis-

tinguish between art and not-art? Must art not speak a language that is distinct from other languages?

The answers are all leaning toward a “yes,” but a hesitant yes; because there is more...

What happens if we turn the assumed problem upside down? Instead of considering the diffuse borders and uncertain status of “the work” as a sign of the soon and probable death of art, could we not consider the fact that art ventures out in an uncertain world, experimenting with its rules and exposing itself to much risk, as a *sign of health*? Instead of seeing the uncertainty that accompanies experimenting as the death sign of an art that, confused by its own ambiguous essence, moves out and enters foreign areas like the political, one might see it as a death sign of a political game run amok in its fear of a complexity that includes the foreign and strange. Not art but politics has a problem.

The artistic action may use foreign means and act on foreign soil. But it does not make politics. It makes art; this is what it says. Calling the alternative soft drink production *art* is a disturbance in itself. The artists use the game-rules of one area, apply them a bit differently and call what they do by a name foreign to the area to which the rules apply. No ordinary soft drink production company would call what it does art. Except now—and the art institution as well as consumer production is challenged. This would never have happened if what the artists had done was called a political action.

Instead of interpreting it as a sign of the threatening dissolution of art, one might see it as a *sign of hope*. Perhaps the political and economic powers are rather open to influence by the joker-like presence of a “weak” artistic act on the stage of power when it happens in a language they recognize. Perhaps the politician, who maintains and is maintained by these powerful structures, rather pays attention to an alternative commercial



one, we lose the other, and what is left is triviality.

Sense-making is a matter of the heart. The thought of the heart is our aesthetic response in the encounter with the face of the world, be it in the shape of a work of art, a political act or the other person:

Trust *aisthesis*, the sense of the heart; otherwise we go over to another order. I can hardly stress enough the importance of this trust, for the individual aesthetic response is also the watchdog against the Devil who slips into our lives where we least expect, dressed in the most conventional disguise. An aesthetic response is a moral response: *kalon kagathon*... The aesthetic reflex is indeed not merely disinterested aestheticism; it is our survival.<sup>7</sup>

#### Notes

1. K. E. Løgstrup: *Kunst og etik (Art and Ethics)*, pp. 7-8. Gyldendal 1995 (1961).
2. Galen A. Johnson (ed.): *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader. Philosophy and Painting*, p. 142. Northwestern University Press, 1993.
3. Ole Thyssen: *Æstetisk ledelse. Om organisationer og brugskunst (Aesthetic Leadership. On Organisations and Applied Art)*, p. 104. Gyldendal 2003.

4. James Hillman: *The Thought of the Heart*. p. 41. Spring Publications, 1982.

5. From the essay "Eye and Mind" in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 122, Northwestern University Press, 1993 (1964).

6. K. E. Løgstrup: *Ophav og omgivelse (Origin and Surrounding)*, p. 102. Gyldendal 1984.

7. J. Hillman: *The Thought of the Heart*, pp. 40-41. Spring Publications, 1981.