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What a pipe thinks about hammers

Speaker 1: Maybe we can talk a little bit about what aesthetics is. Is it a kind of logic?

Speaker 2: Do you mean in just a basic sense?

Speaker 1: Yeah, let's start with that.

Speaker 2: I'm satisfied with the classical Greek definition of aesthetics, as how something is knowable to the senses. I think that definition provides a good structure to think through. So, aesthetics would simply be a form of knowledge that is obtained through the senses.

Speaker 1: So, maybe we could talk about how coherence plays into aesthetics? How sensibility achieves coherence?

Speaker 2: Yeah, well for something to be sensible, it would have experiential coherence because the senses are situated in the body. Our physical presence gives our experience of phenomena a certain coherence. So, cohesion happens through the unification of the senses in bodily experience. That's how I would understand it.

Speaker 1: Yeah, okay. So, the sensible results from a configuration of materials which in turn create phenomenal effects that are perceived by a particular body, an individual; how does what's transmitted to the viewer become coherent?

Speaker 2: Well, I would say that in daily life there's lots of disparate phenomena that have nothing to do with each other that people make coherent through the mere fact of their own presence; they produce a logic to order these discrete phenomena and make them into something comprehensible, turning those fragments of information into a coherent whole. An extreme example of this impulse is human beings' superstitious tendencies; when we don't know the causal relationships between things, we often invent them. I think it's hard-wired in us, we're inclined toward pattern recognition and to see narrative causality. So, as an artist, cohesion isn't really a concern, viewers produce that, they build meaningful links between phenomena. I simply corral certain phenomena, make them coincident. In other words, individuals bring coherence to phenomena through their localized experience of them... I like the Rancière concept of the distribution of the sensible a lot, maybe too much... his approach allows for an understanding of the political implications of aesthetics, how aesthetics establishes a commons of shared experience, without making the producer of aesthetics into a master. So, in that instance, the question for an artist is how do you expand or intervene in the already existing distribution of sensorial experience? How do you make things that collect phenomena together in a novel way, and thus produce novel experiential knowledge? I think this happens either by expanding the audience for whom a particular arrangement of sensations is available or by presenting a differing arrangement of sensorial phenomena. And when I say audience, I really mean a polis, in terms of inclusion within a community, or exclusion from it, both approaches are a rearrangement of experiential phenomena that leads to understanding or knowledge being made accessible in a way that it wasn't before. My other conception of art practice, which is a bit more narrow, and provisional, is that art is a discourse about aesthetics that occurs through aesthetics. It's kind of like philosophy, which is a discourse about thought or language that is expressed through thought or language. In that sense, art is inherently reflexive.

Speaker 1: So, how do you locate the artist? In this configuration, what is the artist's role?

Speaker 2: Well, an artist would then just be a functionary within the system. Art is a means to intervene in aesthetics, and artists are a part of the art system. Like the relation between law and norms. Law is an abstraction of collective norms and can intervene in them; it is a route for swift action within the slow process of collective

normative development. Law is also reflexive, it conducts itself with an awareness of its own meta operation. I think this is quite similar to the relation between art and aesthetics, or art as a subcategory of aesthetics. Though improvised, I think the analogy works. Law intervenes in norms or morals; art intervenes in aesthetics. An artist is to art as a lawyer is to law, I suppose. Meaning an artist is a functionary.

Speaker 1: Okay. So, does the artist have an imperative or a responsibility?

Speaker 2: Sort of; they have a function within a system. To me, it's kind of like asking if a piece of plumbing in your house has a responsibility; it's a tautological question, a pipe that doesn't function as a pipe isn't really a pipe, it may have the potential to function as a pipe, but it's really just a hollow metal rod or whatever. An artist that doesn't function within the art world, or worlds, isn't an artist. Which is to say that I think reflexivity is ingrained in art practice, part of its function; reflexivity is a process of comprehending one's role within a discourse and operating within that discourse. There is no art without reflexivity because the discourse is about aesthetic communicability. Accountability is always part of it, it's not a variable, so I find it pointless to question.

Speaker 1: So, how does that work?

Speaker 2: If an artist produces irrelevant outcomes that don't function within the discourse, then that artist is replaced, like a leaky pipe. There are more than enough artists. The other question, the one about responsibility, gets too much into vague value judgments and morality; it also places too much emphasis on the individual and ignores the collective. I don't think it's a moral or ethical question, it's simply part of the job. And I don't think that value is mysterious. Markets, especially speculative ones, can make value seem mysterious, but they're just an abstraction, a way to schematize value. They similarly intervene in the systems they model, i.e. the exchange of labor and resources. Abstractions, in general, are both a model and a means of intervention into what they model. They also produce distortions, or more to the point, when abstractions are confused with the real world they image, bad things tend to happen. Human suffering is often the result of that confusion.

Speaker 1: Yeah, I get it. Okay. So, this structure that you are setting up reminds me of this book. It's by this Protestant bishop in the 1930s. It's called *Agape and Eros*. And so, it's basically the transition from Eros to Agape, a shift from love directed toward an object, Eros, to Agape, which is God's love, and is indiscriminate, not tied to an object. In the book, Anders Nygren talks about being a tube, a vessel for God's love to pass through. This seems similar to what you're talking about. So, is there any sense of a kind of self-reflexivity? Or agency?

Speaker 2: There is, but I think accountability, or agency, is merely functional, it is not evidence of a transcendental subject, neither in a pipe nor an artist. I think those terms overemphasize subjectivity and obscure the systems we operate within. That's my problem with terms like responsibility, or even agency. Pipes, to use the bad analogy that I kicked off with, have a kind of agency if looked at in this way, right? They do something, and they can fail at their function. That failure is not evidence of self-determination. It's really just the expectation of a certain function and the fulfillment of that function. It's a question of the role they occupy within a system, and whether or not that role leads to the proper flow of forces that allow that system to operate. So, I just don't like the overemphasis on agency and responsibility in art. While I think that accountability is part of the job, I think that the way that it's commonly formulated makes it too grandiose and makes the artist overly important; it's often used to elevate and heroize the artist, which I think is problematic.

Speaker 1: Going back to the Greeks, I'm sympathetic to the Sophoclean model of responsibility that arises in the face of determinism. How do you feel about that?

Speaker 2: I don't know what the Sophoclean model is.

Speaker 1: Like Oedipus, right? Being a conduit for determinism, he follows through. He has no free will. And so, he's a conduit of the stream of determinism that causes these horrible outcomes. But also, he accepts his fate and accepts the responsibility for enabling this sequence of events.

Speaker 2: Well, I think his actions are just a function of his shifting knowledge. His basic knowledge changes over time. He acts ethically in each instance, he's just unaware of all the operations taking place in the system he is a part of. It doesn't make his actions predetermined, or immoral, it's just about how much knowledge he has. He just does his job as a member of the nobility; he has to preserve that position, act in a manner that accords with that nobility, protect and support sovereign justice, and enact that role as best he can with the information

available to him. He simply acts with nobility in each instance, despite having imperfect information. Then he punishes himself, which is what his job, his nobility, requires.

Speaker 1: What I'm pushing you to relate to is that somehow by being the conduit, or being the pipe still, we can still locate responsibility.

Speaker 2: Sure. Yeah. The job produces guidelines for one's practice. There is being a good pipe and a bad pipe. But I think Oedipus was a good pipe, he did what he was supposed to, and part of his role is being held accountable for his actions regardless of their motivation or intent, unlike law where intent would be a factor in assessing guilt. If you put a metal rod into a plumbing system, the expectations of that system are still the same, it wants to put water through it... We aren't talking about legal definitions of guilt, a metal rod in a plumbing system isn't "guilty" of anything, there's no moral dimension to its dysfunction within the system. In Oedipus, the opposite is the case, it's the system that fails, not him. What we are discussing, more or less, is Aristotelian ethics, one's responsibility to contribute to the common good within the confines of their societal role, an ethics (or responsibility) that extends beyond guilt or innocence and is different from a distinction between morality and immorality. When you're dealing with aesthetics, you're dealing with people's access to a commons of discourse, you're dealing with democracy, and the support of that discourse is part of the job. If you want to support and extend that project, you sign up to be an artist. But, once you sign up, you're accountable even if you decide to operate as though you're not, and if you don't fulfill that role, you run the risk of being replaced. Reducing it to a question of morality, or legal conceptions of guilt or innocence, simplifies things way too much; which is to say, the discourse of art requires a higher and more complex standard than either of those frameworks provide. I haven't heard anyone make a terribly coherent argument to say that acknowledging the stakes or history attached to artistic practice is a bad thing; at most those voices just offer this mumbo-jumbo about responsibility stifling artistic freedom and creativity, which usually comes from non-artists anyway. So, I don't really find the discussion of responsibility all that interesting. Or more exactly, in my experience, talking about responsibility doesn't open up interesting ideas.

Speaker 1: Okay, so for the German romantics, the artist is the completion of the subjective and the objective, because the objective flows through the artist. The subject is also represented through the particularity of the practice, right? Where is subjectivity in your model?

Speaker 2: It isn't in my model. I don't understand why concepts like "subjectivity" aren't abandoned in the same way that old technology is abandoned, at least in its transhistorical form. Why are philosophers or academics fixated on the recovery of models that are so antiquated? I mean, people don't worry about not needing scythes anymore...

Speaker 1: Wait, what?!?

Speaker 2: The farm implement, like what death holds, a reaper. We don't worry about outdated farm implements and their lack of relevance; we don't retheorize the history of agriculture to 'recover' or reapply the logic of the scythe to contemporary circumstances. And when I think of theories of the subject, it just feels like outdated technology. It's a provisional term, rather than a stable concept. It makes sense when you're speaking about an entity that is simply under the rule of law or subject to some power, like a subject of the state, but the word "subject" is a relational term, and when it is used in isolation it is meaningless. You need to specify exactly what a *subject* is being *subjected to* in order for the term to have meaning. The transcendental notion of the subject, even as a category, seems counter-productive... It's fine in a provisional sense, but it fails ontologically. We can use it to provisionally distinguish one type of thing from another in a certain circumstance. For example, in a legal circumstance, it's useful in discussing the difference between a citizen subject, a subject under the law, from a non-citizen subject, one who is excluded from legal protection but included in the sovereign mandate, i.e. included in the law by their exclusion (like undocumented immigrants, chattel slavery, or prisoners of war) as groups of human beings whose rights are abridged; without a thoroughly developed model of power relations, the term collapses into nonsense. Absent that support structure, I think the term is misleading to the point of causing harm; in my experience, it runs the risk of diverting attention away from the systemic failures that cause human suffering. Maybe I'm not being fair to certain academics that invest a lot in the discussion of the subject, but I just don't get it.

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Speaker 1: The project is to recover or construct a kind of agency. It's trying to account for agency within a determinist, historical trajectory.

Speaker 2: Sure, and that conception of the subject had a function in the Enlightenment. There was a necessity for it and there was a kind of theorization and comprehension of the world that was generated from it. That historical trajectory is just as suspect as the term subject. Just as the scythe revolutionized farming at a certain point, and then was absorbed into other technologies, so should the discourse around the transcendental subject. I just don't get the preciousness that people treat certain ideas with... It's like Heidegger's romanticization of the artist; his rigor falls off when the artistic subject enters the picture, and that's really frustrating, it undermines the usefulness of his model. But that's a separate issue, and again it's a toothless dismissal because I'm not a philosopher.

Speaker 1: No, I think this is good. What you've said so far clarifies a lot.

Speaker 2: Okay, wait. What does it clarify?

Speaker 1: It clarifies your project. It locates the movement or the flow of culture through you.

Speaker 2: I just don't like it when I recourse to a negative discourse, a set of refusals. I just glibly dismissed a massive set of historical projects. No one cares what a pipe thinks about hammers.

Speaker 1: No, but it shapes and clarifies your position and your values also.

Speaker 2: Sure, yeah, yeah, but in a negative way. But, it's kind of like what I was trying to say to your class, I think the starting point of rejection is useful because it gives you an easy first step. You start by being reactionary, and that's healthy. I think that as you get older, being reactionary is increasingly problematic.

Speaker 1: And why is that?

Speaker 2: Because it stops you from talking about what you are doing and makes you talk about what you are not doing. It's harder to be for something than against it. And so, while it can be initially clarifying, it can turn into an avoidance tactic. I think at its base, making things or being an artist is always additive. Art is simply unable to negate; you can't make an absence, you can't make a thing that is about not being some other thing. At some point, you have to deal with the fact that it's a thing, itself. I try to always think in affirmative terms, what does my contribution affirm, what am I supporting, rather than what I am refusing or refuting... it's about trying to be useful, trying to contribute...

Speaker 1: No, I think that's okay. That's what it takes to insist on your terms over others.

Speaker 2: Sure. Yeah, signal and noise.

Speaker 1: I think that's good.

Speaker 2: Do you want to stop there?

Speaker 1: Yeah, let's...

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