

On branches and sticks, or:

What is freedom good for?

(For: Artforum, New York)

If a doe walks in the forest, it is a movement of the very forest, like that of leaves in the wind: the forest is a complex system of movements, (an "ecosystem"). But if a man walks in the forest, his movement disturbs that complex system: it is an input. This may be shown by the following example: The man breaks off a branch which stands in his way, and he turns it around to use it as a stick to break off further branches. He tears an object from its context, (he "produces" it), and he turns it against the context, (he applies it). This typically human gesture is called "art", and it has an obvious purpose: to clear a path in the forest. How are we to understand it?

One way to do it is this: Man does not dwell in the forest like the doe does, but he inhabits an abyss between two worlds. The one is as it is, but it is not as it ought to be, (for instance: the forest). The other ought to be but is not, (the world of values). The branch is, but not as it ought to be, because it stands in the way, (to say it in Greek: it is a "problem"). The stick ought to be, but before ~~may~~ producing it it is not, it is an unrealized value, (to say it in Greek: it is an "ideal"). Art is a method to solve problems and to realize values: the stick I produce is a branch as it ought to be. The stick is an artifact, an artifice, a work of art.

By opposing "ought to be" to "what is", man negates what is: in fact, his very existence is that negation. This negation used to be called "spirit". There are people who do not like that negation, who do not like themselves: they prefer branches to sticks, and forests to forest exploitation. They would like to walk in the forest like does do. However, such a double negation cannot transform them into does: ecologists, greens, and mystics of every kind are failed does. This must be said, but having said it, it must be admitted that sticks are not necessarily very good at opening pathes. Are we in fact more free to walk than we were before we began with stick production? Do cave bears and hail storms oppress us more than does the secret police and thermonuclear weapons? Is art a good method for opening pathes for the "spirit"?

The answer is that it is not, because the stick can stand in one's way at least as much as the branch does. It may have been put there on purpose. It may be said that this is not the fault of art, (and of technology, its younger brother), but that evil people, (like capitalists and/or communists), are to blaim for having misused it. But this is not a very good excuse for art, if it is a method for achieving freedom, how can anyone abuse it? There must be some inner contradiction within art itself which permits that abuse.

It is easy to see that contradiction: the stick, although it is an object torn from its original context and turned around, is still an object. Which is to say that we are still subject to it. And we are subject to it in a more complex way than we are to branches. The fact is that the stick strikes back at the stick producer, who again strikes back at the stick, until a Gordian knot of

feed-backs makes it impossible to distinguish between the stick and its producer. To illustrate this, knot which binds us to the object, let us consider a few of those feed-backs:

I break off a branch, and this permits me to see what the branch is like: I have gained knowledge. I turn the branch around, and this permits me to see how sticks ought to be: I have gained insight into values. I then use the stick as a sort of third leg, and this permits me to see how legs work: I have gained self-knowledge. As I now walk with my stick, I do it better than I did before: I have changed my behavior. Having thus seen that the stick is a sort of leg, I can make a better stick next time. And having seen the the leg is a sort of stick, I can walk even better next time. Thus art is a source of knowledge, of (political and aesthetic) evaluation, and of self-knowledge, it changes the world and it changes man, but it establishes a dependence of man upon sticks, (upon culture).

This concrete experience with ever increasing knowledge, ever deeper insight into values, and ever better self-knowledge which accompanies stick production, (the artistic gesture), is a fascinating, inebriating adventure. It absorbs me. It is as if a voice had called me from within the branch, saying: "I dare you to turn me around", and as if I had followed that calling, that vocation. I become victim of a giddiness, ("vertiginous creativity"), which has me forget why I wanted to make the stick in the first place. I no longer make sticks in order to open up paths (for freedom), but in order to make ever more perfect sticks, and to become an ever better stick producer. (The universe of artificial objects which surrounds us is the result of that giddiness, of that oblivion what art is for.)

When I walk into the forest, I do not do so in the abstract, but I enter it coming from a specific historical, cultural situation. Which has programmed me to believe that branches ought to be sticks, and with methods how to do it. Generations of stick producers have entered the forest before me, and I carry them with me. When I turn my own branch into a stick, it is they within me who do so. And the stick I am going to produce is the last link of an immemorial stick tradition. All the previous stick producers, and all the sticks ever produced, are somehow here and now with me. Although the producers are dead, and the sticks decayed, they are immortal within me. And so shall I be myself, and so will be the stick I produce, if only I hand my stick over to the next stick producer, and if my stick is slightly different from all the previous ones, for the next producer to distinguish it and remember it. Thus stick production is a challenge to overcome death and to become immortal. Or, to put it less selfishly: to live for others and to live on within them. Now, if stick production gives a meaning to my life which goes on beyond my death, how am I to remember that I started out to make sticks in order to open a path in the forest?

The Gordian knot which binds the artist to his stick binds the user of the stick just as much to the stick, only differently. Thus man becomes subject to his artifacts even more than he is subject to natural objects. The original

purpose of art, (to make us free from objects), has fallen into oblivion. All of a sudden, however, technology, (that most sophisticated art), seems to cut the Gordian knot, and to deliver us from being subject to objects. Were this not happening in fact, it would strike us as being utterly fantastic. Technology achieves this marvel thanks to two artifices: "automation" and "supportless information". This is how art will look like in the immediate future:

I need no longer tear off a branch and turn it around to become a stick; a robot will do it for me. What I shall have to do is to program the robot to do this. And I shall do so by synthetizing an image of the stick-to-be on a computer screen, and by feeding the robot with that image. Thus art will no longer be concerned with changing the world, so that it may become as it ought to be, (the robot does that better). It will be concerned with telling the robot how the world ought to be, (with the manipulation of values). No longer will man have to face objects and their perfidious inertia, (the robot will do that). Man will no longer be subject to objects. He will manipulate values, (models, ideals), instead, and the values thus elaborated will be realized automatically. Is this, not "absolute" freedom, in the true sense of the term "ab-solute", namely "ab-stracted" from objects? Has not thus art finally found its way back to its original purpose? Are we, thanks to art and technology, on the treshold of freedom?

Yes, but there is this question: Why should the robot make sticks, if it is the robot, and not ourselves, which enters the forest? Are the sticks-to-be which the artist synthetizes on his screen meant to open up pathes for robots? Or what are they good for? What is freedom good for? (By the way, this question is characteristic of freedom achieved: no longer "free from something" but "free to do something"). The question amounts to this: what is art going to do, (what are we going to do, since apparently everybody is going to be an artist), if it no longer has to face objects?

There is of course an obvious answer: it will make images of sticks-to-be for the pure pleasure of image-making. "Ars gratia artis". But this "l'art pour l'art" answer cannot be a good one. Because it is the essence of the stick-to-be that a branch ought to be like it. It is the essence of the stick-to-be that it is meant to give a meaning to branches. Thus the second, and more pondered answer to the question is this: the business of an art set free from objective resistance is to propose meanings, ("Sinnggebung"). Which has been its business from the beginning, but which has been obscured by its involvement with objects. "What is the meaning of a branch? It is meant to be a stick". "What is the meaning of a bull in Lascaux? It is meant to be hunted." The business of art is to impose meanings on the world that is absurdly as it is, and thus to propose meanings to human existence. Art set free from objective resistance will be free to go after its business. This is what freedom is good for.

But all this is utter cynical nonsense. Most people are in no position to ask what freedom is good for. They are oppressed by hunger, disease and brutal tyranny, and they may be relied on to prevent us from playing around with robots and computers. Once they are able to turn a branch into a stick, they will use

-4- 4

it to break our screens, (and our heads, should we be sitting in front of them). And they will be doing this even earlier and better, should we ourselves be using our screens to desing the sticks for them. So that this whole utopian vision of an art set free to propose meanings may be seen as a symptom of decadence: we use our newly won freedom to commit suicide.

It will have been noticed that this paper has avoided, out of prudery, the use of the word "alienation". It can avoid it no longer. Art, in its involvement with objects, was a method to overcome alienation. By having to turn a branch around, man tried to overcome his alienation from the forest. Automation, by setting art free from branches, has deprived it of its "work therapeutical" dimension. Of all those fascinating and inebriating aspects which were discussed when the Gordian knot was being disentangled. Thus art set free throws man back into total alienation. Not being subject to objects, man is no longer a subject in any sense of that term. Our children and grandchildren sitting in front of their terminals and sythetizing sticks-to-be are the very image of alienation. Hungry and persecuted children cannot tolerate this image. Which obliges us to conclude that absolute freedom is synonymus with total alienation. This paper wants therefore to be read as a praise of absolute freedom, of total alienation. Or, to put it into historical perspective: as a praise of folly.