

## Dialogue on Art as Imitation or Creation

(The following was written as the result of correspondence with Leif Söberg, Columbia University. I wish to express my appreciation for his serious interest in Structurist art. The questions and answers were constructed to facilitate the non-artist's approach to Structurist art. The "Dialogue" first appeared in translation in the Swedish educational journal, Studiekamraten, 1961. In that publication some of the material here included had to be deleted by the limitations of space. Charles Biederman.)

We were in the artist's workroom. On one wall there are reproductions of landscapes by Constable, Turner, Courbet, Monet and Cézanne. On another wall there are studies of Structurist art where all reference to nature's particular forms are absent. This art is like painting but only because it uses color, and like sculpture only because it too is formed in three dimensions.

? "Why," I asked the artist, "do you wish to make such changes in art?"

"Because I respond to experiences similar to those which necessitated previous artists' going further than their past."

? "Whatever the changes, the past always continued nature imitation. You, however, exclude it."

"True. Change is no longer from one kind of imitation to another. Such art became the special province of Camera artists in the 19th century."

? "Nearly all the art around us contradicts you. What about Braque, Picasso, and so many others?"

"I do not wish to deny that artists continue to imitate nature in some way. The vast majority do, even most of those who want to exclude imitation. The past repeatedly reveals that whenever some form of art achieves public acceptance, the majority resent or else compromise fundamental change. How much more severe this problem becomes in our century, when it is necessary to make an immense change, such as, from imitation to non-imitation. Life in all its aspects incessantly reveals its need for change, for renewal if it is not to decline. Today the need for renewal is incomparably greater than at any time in the past."

? "Have not Braque, Picasso and the rest renewed imitation?"

"It looks that way. But have they really succeeded? Let's see. First note that such artists adamantly deny that they imitate nature. Since Cubism, they claim to be 're-creating' nature."

? "Imitation continued as re-creation. What objection can there be to that?"

"I repeat. They do not want to continue; they disclaim imitation. They seek an entirely new goal, where the artist, not nature, is the creator. But observe in what a strange way they seek their goal. What they *say* they do contrasts sharply with what we can *see* they do. Look! They *manipulate imitations of nature's creations*. If this were not so, we would not recognize imitations of figures, tables, fruit, etc., in their art. In short, they *seek creation by merely manipulating the very method of art they disclaim —imitation*. They fail in what they wish to avoid, and fail in what they wish to achieve."

? "Perhaps such art goes beyond nature, as so many have claimed since Cubism, making it more than imitation."

"From Picasso to Mondrian the key term regarding nature has been 'destruction.' Picasso says he seeks creation through the 'destruction' of nature's objects, that is, nature's creations. Mondrian

says he seeks creation through the ‘destruction’ of nature’s structuring, that is, nature’s method of creating. Are we to believe that art creation is essentially nature destruction? Does art go beyond nature by merely destroying nature? Nature destructions as art become what one would expect—something less, not more, than nature.”

? “How has this confusion over the goal of art come about?”

“As so often happens. We let ourselves be confused and deceived by words, instead of using our eyes to *see* what is happening in the actuality of art itself. Nevertheless, something is being destroyed by this confusion: it is the old method of imitating nature.”

? “Are you contending that such artists are themselves destroying the very art they uphold?”

“Yes. Long ago Cézanne made clear that the direction of a *useful* imitation had ended, that in its place there was now the possibility of an art of ‘creation.’ But the general response to this discovery has been persistently ambivalent and compromising. Consequently, in place of Cézanne’s constructive creation, the majority offer us the destructive creations of their obdurate now useless mimeticism.”

? “I presume that all this is connected with your rejection of both the old art mediums?”

“When imitation ceases to be the artist’s task, the usefulness of the old mediums ceases too. Remember they were *specifically* created for purposes of nature imitation. Only painting, which was the dominant medium since the Italian Renaissance, was able to continue for a short time beyond imitation.”

? “And what painting was this?”

“The paintings of Monet, Cézanne, Mondrian. They transformed art from imitation to creation. During this transitional period, however, constant attempts were made by many to adjust the old medium to the new needs of art. New preparations of pigments, new brush techniques, new materials such as sand, and so on, were introduced into the old painting medium. Finally, certain painters went so far as to use mechanical means for *controlling the use* of the paint brush.”

? “Earlier you spoke about manipulations of the content of painting; now you are referring to the technical manipulations of the painting medium itself. What significance do you attach to these various manipulations of the medium?”

“When creation was finally realized in art, the medium so well adapted to imitation became a handicap. For painting could only permit very limited *imitations* of art creations and thus put the artist into very serious conflict with nature’s creative reality. Painting both limited and distorted the artist’s structural ability to enter the full living reality of creation.”

? “What do you mean by the ‘full living reality of creation’?”

“The complete structural dimensionality as given in the spatial reality of nature. Nature is a spatial world in contrast to painting’s extremely limited linear dimensions. Painting could only lead to *obscure* fantasies of nature’s creations (Braque-Picasso) , or mystical *obscurities* of nature’s method of creation (Mondrian-Kandinsky)

? “Nature, then, remains the concern of the new artist even though he has ceased to imitate objects?”

“Nature is of vital concern to the Structurist artist. For a long time now, many artists of various extremes have considered nature useless. Words! It is possible to *say* one thing and *do* something else, as did the ‘re-creators’ of nature. Nature *cannot* be evicted from *any* form of art. To do so,

the artist must escape all the nature about him, and even from himself, since he is a part of nature.”

? “How does nature serve the purposes of Structurist art?”

“The goal of Structurist art as creation implies the answer. Nature, besides displaying its visual creations, also displays the visual means of its creation. It is on this latter aspect that the artist now literally centers his vision of nature. Nature’s creative process gives the means for art creation.”

? “I am having difficulty imagining nature in the new way you indicate.”

“It is useless to imagine it; one must learn to literally *see* it, otherwise it becomes difficult to comprehend. The trouble lies in our being canalized to the past way of visualizing nature. Many seek to create with a vision of nature that has not progressed beyond Mondrian, Cézanne, Monet or even Courbet and Delacroix. There is then the constant compromising of the old with the new vision, hence the arts of confusion we see everywhere.”

? “You mean the artist must literally *see* a new nature?”

“Yes, but I would like to make this clear. The new vision of the Structurist is not based on a negation of the past’s vision of nature, but is an *extension* of it. *Visible nature is more than its created objects*. A deeper structural curiosity is now necessary. The artist observes how nature creates with its visible structural elements, thus perceiving the immense structural diversity of its mode of creation. In this way he becomes familiar with the potentialities of creation for art.”

? “This is all well and good, but how is the artist to pick his way in all this immense creative diversity of nature?”

“In the past, nature supplied its created objects as the model for the artist’s art forms; now it is the creative *potentialities* of the artist which indicate the art forms unique to man. Nature’s role is to indicate the evolutionary possibilities, the *laws of structural expression*, not the specific art forms.”

? “Do you mean that, as nature supplied the past with a superior art form, it now supplies the future with a superior method of art creation?”

“One could put it that way. Three hundred years ago Poussin observed that art cannot ‘pass beyond nature’s boundaries.’ This is no less true today. The artist is now able to go further than Poussin because he has *extended the boundaries of man’s vision* of nature. Nature is now seen as creation, a creative diversity that seems to extend to infinity. In this direction the horizon of art as creation extends indefinitely.”

? “Nature and the artist, I take it, now produce distinctly different creations?”

“Yes, and the distinction must be clear. Everything depends upon it. The Structurist does not seek the particular creations nature realizes in flowers, rocks, trees, hills, etc.; that would lead art right back to imitation.”

? “What about the limitations, the ‘boundaries’ of nature?”

“*The limitations are now those of creative structure, not those of nature’s creations. The creative process of nature has not been exhausted. Nature has not created all that can be created within its structural boundaries.*”

? “Your last remarks suggest that art and science share similar creative possibilities within nature.”

“In general, yes. Scientists are structuring atomic relations into a host of creations that have not existed in nature before. A similar situation exists for artists.”

? “Certainly you don’t mean the artist is involved with atomic structure?”

“Of course not. The artist’s structural concerns exist in the visual aspect of nature. Visible form, color, space, light, these are his elements of structure. The ‘building blocks’ of vision open up a whole new world of visual creation. The artist discerns the possibilities *inherent* in the visible aspect of nature’s creative process, *possibilities which could not be realized by nature without man.*”

? “Your last sentence seems to express the ancient theory of idealism, a theory you stringently reject when advanced by others.”

“Let me explain. The ancient idealists referred to a perfection *inherent* but *unrealized* in the *perceived creations* of nature. It is just this attitude which the present re-creators’ of nature continue, but in a pathological way. As respects the Structurist’s intention, I refer to creations *inherent in the structurally perceived potentialities* of nature’s creative process, not in its perceived creations, but which could not be activated into being until that part of nature called man did so. It is the difference between a mimetic art that deliberately *imposes upon* perceived nature, and a creative one that *reposes in* the structural actualities of perceived nature.”

? “Are you implying that man is not wholly subject to nature as are other forms of life, that nature’s creative process is also subject to man’s creative desires?”

“You have summed it up: If this were not so, creation would not be possible in art and science or in any other form of human activity.”

? “What is the relation between an art of creation and the emphasis in your various writings upon ‘development’ or the ‘evolution of vision?’”

“Follow the astrophysicist as he describes the formation of the cosmos. Out of the amorphous gas there comes the birth of the atomic elements of creation. Step by step the cosmos is *formed*, galaxy after galaxy appears, there is continuous evolution. Man, the artist, is part of this evolutionary and/or creative structural process. To ignore this process puts the artist into conflict with the inescapable laws of nature and his own being. The artist’s goal, so to speak, is to achieve a human cosmos of creation. Towards this end there is only the path of growth, of evolution. It is the law for everything in nature, be it a human being or a galaxy.”

? “Somewhere you have written to the effect that the new evolution of art must achieve a clear beginning, as did imitative art.”

“Without a simple, coherent base of departure, evolution cannot begin, let alone be sustained. To begin arbitrarily is as nonsensical as to start building a house by first putting the shingles on. True, a carpenter isn’t likely to do that; unfortunately, an artist can try to do so. The precursors of Structurist art, Monet, Cézanne, Mondrian, all attached the greatest importance to the fundamental function of simplicity. Beginning with complexity gives a false sense of achievement and eventually ends in confusion.”

? “I gather that is why the Structurist chooses the simple linear, rectangular plane instead of the complex plane of curvature?”

“Yes, exactly. It introduces the utmost simplicity possible into the actuality of structure as given by nature. As I have explained elsewhere, the complexity of nature as represented by the sphere

*is being approached* by first reducing that complexity to the simplicity of cube structure."

? "This suggests the next question. Will art remain confined to such planes?"

"Naturally not, and it cannot. Why should we want to condemn all future artists to our own present limitations, when the example of nature presents its infinite wealth of possibilities for future creation? Such limitations would force art into the dead-end of absolutes. This has already happened. Mondrian was compelled to make just such an error the moment he denied visible nature and sought an absolute in the right angle. The attitude of evolution constantly extends the new direction of art into the fullness of creation as given by nature's structure. The danger here, however, is in making haste."

? "Will this evolution affect the present relief limitation of the new art?"

"Certainly. So far the evolution has been through painting into relief. The future will continue to go further, eventually engaging the full use of nature's spatial reality. Again, I repeat, the danger lies in making haste."

? "Then, I suppose, this art will become a form of sculpture?"

"That would be a serious mistake. Sculpture is the earliest form of imitation to reach a high degree of development. It is the most simple, direct medium of imitation. The new art of creation does not imitate; therefore, it must also avoid imitating the imitative form effects of sculpture."

? "Since Structurism uses mediums of actuality, how do you distinguish it from sculpture?"

"To begin with, notice that the manipulations of both content and medium, which have occurred in sculpture since Cubism, indicate that this *method* of art is involved in fruitless efforts to compromise the old and the new, just as was noted earlier in the case of painting. To dig holes in primitive-like figures, to leave ugly gaping spaces in putrescent drips of metal, etc., are naive and compromising concerns with the new view of space. The latter spreads out possibilities for *structural forms unique to man*. Observing the structural diversity of nature, the artist extends this creation into hitherto untried possibilities of creating in space. Space becomes a visually palpable medium for creation of spatial experiences that could never have occurred before in nature. It follows that the forms of Structurist art will be unlike nature's, somewhat as nature creates animals unlike plants. Sculptors are like nature trying to make an animal with leaves."

? "Does this concern with space have any similarities to the physicist's?"

"There are significant coincidences in various current developments of human life. Theoretical physicists have amalgamated space with time; applied physicists have physically pierced the terrestrial limits of space, at the same time that artists are creating a new art out of what appears to be the infinite possibilities of creative space. It would be a mistake, however, to think that science indicates the artist's proper concern with space. Art is no more physics than physics is art.

? "Granted, but what about the new problem that then arises? I mean art is now without familiar forms and so will no longer arouse the literature and philosophies associated with familiar forms. What human purpose will such art serve?"

"This is to question not only something that appears new, but something existing in human life ever since man began to cogitate beyond the animal level. From the beginning of man's cultural evolution he has been nurtured by the example of nature's creations. Now he understands that creation in a far deeper sense.

? “I can understand practical creation, but of what use is pure creation?”

“The act of creation is the evolutionary mainspring of man’s efforts to rise towards a human state. A fundamentally creative orientation is necessary if each human life is to achieve adequate fulfillment. From this viewpoint, a purely creative art is a basic necessity. Without having truly experienced the art forms of pure creation, however, its use is certainly difficult to comprehend. To encourage your curiosity, let us consider two fields whose creations are accepted everywhere. One is very practical. In science, men of the stature of Poincaré and Einstein have said that if they were denied the creative experience of their concern with nature, science would lose all interest, *however practical*. Then there is music. For almost three hundred years it has been concerned with purely instrumental creation, as art is now concerned with purely visual creation. In various forms then, the act of creation has been a central necessity to the best of human efforts.”

? “Are you saying that pure creation can be *useful* without being *practical*?”

“Not exactly. I use the two terms interchangeably. Precisely because visual and musical creation are free of those demands *too exclusively* regarded as practical, they are therefore more useful for freeing the human spirit towards a humane culture than all so-called practicality put together. These arts give to life, in a direct form, the basic necessity for its adequate fulfillment—life as a creative *experience* and *expression*. The act of creation is the epitome of the human experience of being alive, in all its aspects. Art is understood as being indispensably practical by those who seek a life worth living.”