

## INTRODUCTION

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“We must get close to the secret, especially the feeling for the secret.”

—Rudolf Steiner, February 18, 1918

WHEN I FIRST READ THIS BOOK, I was fresh out of art school, my head full of the art theory of the late twentieth century. We already knew everything there was to know. Both abstract and figurative art lay behind us. Conceptual or expressive? There was really no difference anymore—everything was permitted and possible, everything was devalued equally and therefore also impossible. Art had context and history, but not really a future. We had arrived after everything had already happened—after modernism—following which painting died and yet lived on—after the object, the image, the specific medium, the “happening,” and the performance.

At the same time, at age twenty-eight, I devoted myself to an intensive study of anthroposophy. The thoughts expressed by Rudolf Steiner in this book therefore hit me like a hammer—art became something entirely different. I had never encountered a thinker who could unite the development of modern art with an esoteric worldview so assuredly and with such depth. Suddenly, the spiritual roots of the modern criticism of representation became visible. I encountered ideas that did not cherish the development of art since the nineteenth century in relation to the past, but in relation to a possible future creativity. “Modernity” was *not* finished—it had hardly begun. This book was and still is a banquet, a guide that points toward possibilities we have yet to realize.

After this first encounter, I made a deeper study of this book as a whole, as well as individual lectures, and also taught it many times—but the delightful shock is always there. It is amazement at what the

coming art could be if we have the courage to go the distance, to embrace the dimensions opened here and their cosmic radicality.

This volume of *The Collected Works of Rudolf Steiner* charts a path through decades of his thinking about art. Beginning with his early philosophical work and literary criticism at the end of the nineteenth century and on into his later lectures, it follows his endeavor to reveal in words the mystery obscured by the vague concept of “art.” From 1888 to 1921 lie thirty-three years of intensive critical struggle, with older and newer attempts to say something essential about the arts. Viewed as a whole, this volume forms one of the most provocative collections of the twentieth century on the subject of art. It offers a unique analysis of the origin, foundation, and method of the creative process, but its radical nature is not sufficiently recognized—neither in the art world with its academic criticism nor in anthroposophical circles.

The challenge of saying something about art was personal for Rudolf Steiner. He experienced it as deeply connected with his biography. It is not for nothing that, in the last lecture of this volume, he points to his repeated attempts to develop a new approach and new forms of expression for speaking about art. We find at least three forms of this attempted approach in this book.

The five texts that begin the book—composed between 1888 and 1898—deal with the foundational questions of aesthetic experience and of art, clothed in the language of philosophy. They outline a new approach to aesthetics but remain anchored in the style and language of nineteenth-century German philosophy—more precisely, of German idealism.

The first lecture in part two, “The Being of the Arts,” is actually not a lecture at all but a story, an esoteric fairytale. I do not know of any other place in Rudolf Steiner’s writings or lectures in which he so clearly eschews explanation and makes use of purely imaginative descriptions without any clarifications. If there is anything at all comparable, it is the individual short fairytales strewn here and there throughout the *Mystery Dramas*, but these lack the in-depth and precise intensity of the “fairytale lecture.” This extraordinary attempt to communicate the sensory foundations of the various arts in pictorial

language only becomes understandable when we realize what a paradox Steiner is trying to capture in words. The mysterious question that inspired this fairytale could be formulated thus: *What is the spiritual reality that underlies the sensory experience of a work of art when we understand the sensory element as an essential component of art?* If we wish to grasp these contradictions in their full complexity, then we must remember that the metaphysical tradition since Plato distinguishes sharply between essence and appearance. But in art they are inseparable; the work is what we see, hear, etc. It is, to put it as Steiner does, “sensory-suprasensory.” Therefore, there is no underlying separation between essence and appearance. But how do you speak about something that in its sensory nature *is* suprasensory or essential? Here Steiner calls upon the picture or fairytale.

The seven lectures that follow the “fairytale” deal with various aspects of the relationship between soul-spiritual reality, clairvoyant consciousness, and the modality of art. In terms of their form, these lectures are transcripts of the spoken word. In terms of their content, they can be divided into two perspectives, even if both perspectives sometimes appear in the same lecture. On the one hand, they strive for a general understanding of art; they point to sources of artistic impulses, of imagination and inspiration in general. They seek to describe how art is, without reference to a specific art form or work of art. On the other hand, the lectures portray some of the essential differences between the individual artistic mediums. They point to the anchoring of the arts—painting, music, poetry, etc.—in the differentiated human constitution and in their different points of contact with spiritual reality. And yet, at the heart of all the lectures lie the same questions: What are the real connections between art, the soul-spiritual element, and clairvoyance? What does clairvoyant research offer artists when we recognize that the arts, a work of art, should never be the representation or illustration of either physical or spiritual experiences and facts?

We can grasp the full radicality of Steiner’s position if we understand it not only in its spiritual-scientific content but also in its historical context. His absolute rejection of representation as an artistic value, but not as an artistic tool, refers to two ideas that have decisively

influenced the understanding of art from the nineteenth century up to the present. One is the idea of realism, that art should be a faithful mirror of reality, that a work of art is good to the extent that the representation is faithful to nature, or rather faithful to reality. In contrast to this is the will to represent ideas—that is, spiritual or soul content—through art. It is the desire for art to have a message or to become the expression of a feeling, which has an ideological and conceptualizing effect on the representation. The artwork is formed in such a way that not the mimesis but the idea or ideal is propagated. Art becomes the mouthpiece of a worldview.

Although both ideas were fought against and pushed aside by early modern art and art theory, as well as by Steiner, they live on in our late modernity perhaps more energetically than ever. They appear in a hidden and renewed form as the will to mix art with life, to make life art and art life, to make art that looks like life—that is, in the form of a new realism—and likewise in the marked role of the conceptual element in contemporary art. The conceptualizing tendency is present everywhere today, as art seeks to express ideas, political and social views or concepts. Of course, there are wonderful works of art that do take the ideal, political, natural, or everyday as their subject, but to the extent that the representation of life or ideas stands in the foreground, we have returned again to the old. If I wish to show how something looks or to represent my thoughts about the world, then I have returned to either the realistic or the idealistic position. Works of art are potent and deeply moving, not because they are realistic or idealistic, but because they make use of the real and the ideal as mediums.

Rudolf Steiner considers the desire to copy, reproduce, or imitate the sense world—as well as the wish to express, represent, or reveal the suprasensory, beginning with thoughts and ideas—as a crime against artistic feeling. He goes so far in the formulation of his distaste as to characterize the desire for naturalistic representation as a barbarization of the life of soul. He describes the wish to embody pure ideas in art as an obsession of the intellect, and in works of art that become an expression of a worldview, he sees simply a barbarization of feeling—that is, the complete lack of taste. But if art should represent neither

humans, landscapes, objects, and stories, nor feelings, ideas, beings, thoughts, and knowledge, then what should the artist do?

The key to Steiner's descriptions of artistic experience, of processes and works, lies in the fundamental structures of human consciousness, as these are sketched in his earlier philosophical work. Already by 1894, in his *Philosophy of Freedom* (CW 4), he describes how the act of perception divides reality for us into two halves. Impressions stream into us through the senses, whereas the thought content of the world—its meaning, its lawfulness, that which makes the things what they are—reaches us through the detour of intuition and thinking. When I observe a tree, I connect the colors, forms, smells, and sounds that come to me through my senses with the concepts and thoughts that I possess and that I can grasp with my faculty of intuition. I can connect the following concepts with my sensations: "large, green, strong, healthy, tree, branches, etc." I do not see or know exactly how the tree grows; I only perceive the fact that it grows. Thus I connect my sensations with the thoughts about the tree that I can grasp intuitively, so that my inner representation of the tree is an adequate picture, even if it does not contain everything that a tree is. The truth consists precisely of the possibility of bringing together the appropriate thoughts with the given sensory impressions. In the act of thinking and imagining, we create the unity of reality as a content of our consciousness, but only as far as our powers of cognition are able to reach.

In contrast to this sense-oriented consciousness, in his later work Steiner describes clairvoyant consciousness, beginning with imagination. *In the sense in which Steiner employs this concept*, imagination designates the capacity to perceive the world in its indivisible reality of meaning and sensation. In imagination, reality always appears to me as a picture, but one that is not perceived through the bodily senses. *Through the fact that in imagination the sensory constitution does not have to separate the world into sensory and suprasensory, what is perceived appears in its full unity. Meaning and picture, thought and appearance emerge as one—what I see I know.* That is the imaginative, the suprasensory picture-perception, an experience of the world in which thoughts are contained in the perception—I know what I see,

or what I see I know. Perception and thinking reveal in this case their shared origin.

Every other form of suprasensory experience, in which perception and cognition arise separately, we designate in spiritual science as vision. In regard to visions and dreams, we feel the need to reflect, but in imagination, perception contains thought.

Artistic experience is closer to imaginative consciousness than it is to sensory perception, but with an important, decisive difference: it is not a purely suprasensory experience but a sensory one; it is perceived through the bodily senses. *Thus, art is the only sensory experience in which sensation reaches me without being separated from content, in which meaning and picture are given simultaneously, and it is, therefore, sensory-suprasensory or suprasensory-sensory.* In a work of art, there are no ideas independent of the sensory content; meaning and the form of appearance create an inseparable unity. It is not that we cannot extract any ideas from an artwork but that when we do so, we are left with an idea but no art. It would be like discussing the quality of the paint that was used or even this or that paint manufacturer. The idea, just like the paint, is a tool and an element—it is not the art.

Music provides a good example of this—a musician can play the same notes one time wonderfully and another time terribly. The fact that the notes form a well-written piece—that is, an ideal musical work—does not change the fact that one time it was very good and another time it was a catastrophe. The notes and the sound cannot, as far as art is concerned, be separated from one another.

It is because of this uniqueness within the boundaries of the sensory world that Steiner speaks again and again of art as sensory-suprasensory. *Art has no hidden dimension; its sensory and suprasensory content form a unity.* What appears in art appears exactly as it is. Whereas an invisible activity lies hidden behind nature, in art the whole is manifest—the painting is what we see, the music is what we hear, and when we read a poem or speak it aloud, there is nothing standing behind the words that does not resound in what is read. In other words, art is the place within the sense world where things appear as they are, and, as such, it is a place where things are freed from enchantment.

In the artistic event, in the work, and in the experience of the work, things are called upon to be what they actually are.

This expresses itself in Steiner's thinking as two sources of artistic imagination—one in the meeting with nature and the other in working creatively out of one's own soul. Both impulses can be found in every work of art, even if one or the other is predominant. As in a Celtic knot, we find nature and soul intertwined as two surging streams in art.

When we look into the surrounding world—we can call this world “nature” in the above sense—then it opens itself to the artistic sense as something divided within itself. On all sides there wells forth from nature not what nature is but what it can be. Nature is full of conditions; everything appears to us as determined and limited by a greater necessity. Whether it is a tree whose growth is limited by its own substance, by the conditions of the soil, etc., or a soul whose expression is held back by the limitations of the body—everything, according to Rudolf Steiner, appears suppressed by a higher power. Nothing in nature can completely fulfill its potential. In nature, body and world are enchanted. But, whether consciously or not, nature calls forth in the creative soul the desire to free itself from its limitations. What is chained by a higher force in nature calls to the artist to free it from enchantment, to allow it to unfold its full potential in art. *This is one of the sources of artistic imagination: the artist is called upon to penetrate through perception into the phenomena of nature in order to release its potential and to enhance it in the artwork, lending it a fuller expression.*

The other source of imagination lies in the human being, in the unconscious or conscious visions that strive from the depths of our life of will and feeling up to the surface of our consciousness. There, pictures arise that we should not confuse with reality, impulses that find their healthy place in the pictorial nature of a work of art. The quality, wholesomeness, and truth of these inspiring visions depend on the person who calls them forth. They form the purely human contribution to cosmic imagination—that which should stream into art but can never originate in nature.

Both the hidden aspect in nature and the hidden essence of the human being are called forth into appearance in order to find themselves

pictorially. The arising of what is unconscious in the human being and the arising of what is suppressed in nature to the point of an image-like existence—these are the sources of art. It is the work of disenchantment: “Art is a continual redemption of mysterious life, which cannot be in nature itself...” (February 17, 1918). What is called forth in art is neither the real nor the ideal, but rather the possible, that which is always in a state of becoming.

These central ideas are prepared early on (1909) through the fairy-tale lecture, “The Being of the Arts.” There, Steiner tries to touch on the origin of the various artistic qualities of dance, music, architecture, and so on, pointing to the spiritual reality of the bodily senses. He places the senses before us as enchanted hierarchical beings and presents art as their redemption through the awakening human spirit. If we pay careful attention to the unfolding of these pictorial thoughts, then it will immediately become clear why a great teacher of humanity, such as Rudolf Steiner, would invest so much of his time and energy in art. Again and again throughout this volume, he points in various ways to the same reality of artistic experience: “So here, too, it is a freeing from necessity, a freeing of what the human being is when his spirit and soul halt at the abyss of the sphere of the senses” (April 9, 1921).

From the philosophy to the psychology of the arts, this collection, if read in the right way, can be experienced as a continuation of *The Philosophy of Freedom*. It conjures a kind of “aesthetics of liberation” that does not have anything to do with all kinds of emotional “creative freedom” but is rather the beginning of an art that connects magically with the world as its release from enchantment. If we are able to internalize these thoughts, to develop them to the point where they are charged with feeling and descend deep into the will, then we will endow them with the capacity to serve as a foundation for a new future-oriented artistic practice.