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## For the Sake of Art

I don't believe that the primary aim of life is self-development, since I think life has no primary aim. And for that reason I don't think that there is an infinite variety of types. There are in fact many types, as there are many tastes. That no single type is best doesn't mean that every type is as good as another.

But, in the end, the question is not how to rank these types but what to make of them, how to appreciate them, understand them, and use them to create a type, a taste, that is, if we are able and lucky, truly our own. The passion for ranking and judging, the fervor for verdicts, which has for so long dominated our attitude toward the arts, and our lives, is simply another manifestation of our selfishness.

— Alexander Nehamas<sup>1</sup>

Nietzsche argues that of the two types of nihilism, active and passive, the former increases “power of the spirit” whereas the latter brings about the “decline and recession of the power of the spirit”<sup>2</sup>. Active nihilism celebrates life, passive nihilism fosters pessimism and should be avoided. But how, in a world which is pointless, can one increase the power of the spirit? Nietzsche's answer is in art.<sup>3</sup> In part four of the third book in *Will to Power*, “The Will to Power as Art”, Nietzsche discusses a countermovement to the decadence that results in the weakening of the spirit. Art, for Nietzsche, fills the artist with “*sexuality, intoxication, cruelty*” (801). The artist, in turn, “gradually comes to love for their own sake the means that reveal a condition of intoxication” (821). Art for Nietzsche cannot be pessimistic; instead, he believes that art is “stronger than pessimism, ‘more divine’ than truth” (853.IV). Thus:

pessimism, or to speak more clearly, nihilism, counts as ‘truth’. But truth does not count as the supreme value, even less as the supreme power. The will to appearance, to illusion, to deception, to becoming and change (to objectified deception) here counts as more profound, primeval, ‘metaphysical’ than the will to truth, to reality, to mere appearance: — at least is itself mere form of the will to illusion. In the same way, pleasure counts as being more primeval than pain: pain only as conditioned, as a consequence of the will to pleasure (of the will to become, grow, shape, i.e., *to create*: in creation, however, destruction is included). A higher state of affirmation of existence is conceived from which the highest degree of pain cannot be excluded: the *tragic-Dionysian* state. (853:III)

Art for art's sake has been a mantra that the artistic community since the time of Nietzsche, but in this paper, I will ask the question, what if art itself becomes nihilistic? I will be talking about painting, even though painting will serve only as a metonym for all the arts. I

could make the same argument for any of the other creative arts. I will begin by giving a survey of painting before Nietzsche and then by describing painting after Nietzsche, showing the nihilism inherent in it. Then, I will return to Nietzsche's "The Will to Power as Art" to search for what he might have meant by "art for art's sake"<sup>4</sup>: Nietzsche would not find much of what we call art, art.

The Greeks worshiped beauty, but they did not hold the painter in high regard.<sup>5</sup> A disdain for all manual workers, the Greeks had an aesthetic that conformed to both rules and knowledge. In fact, a painter in antiquity was prized for his mastery of skill and technique rather than for any "inspiration" or "meaning" his painting had. The idea of an "artist" along with a "work of art" arises in the fifteenth century during the Italian Renaissance. A revival of Classical Greek culture brought about an interest in the human form and the Platonic ideal. At this time, a work of art, a painting, becomes raised to a higher, more idealized, level. In fact, the Academies (e.g. the Italian and the French) that begin at this time are dedicated to the Platonic ideal of beauty. By the time of Nietzsche, these academies had become stuffy and bureaucratic. The Impressionists, for example, were a group of painters whose work was not accepted at the Salon, and, for this reason, they put on their own show.

Since the time of Nietzsche, though, the degeneration of the arts has continued to spiral downward. Artists continue to push the envelope of art that is made without any aesthetic or formal grounding. Art has turned into "a rejection of formalism and aestheticism, which is what nihilism in art always boils down to"<sup>6</sup>. The art world turned to an anything-goes, "express(ive) ideology, which fatally served the market". Ultimately, "the pluralism of the pictures force-fed the capitalism of the art market to such a degree that aesthetic judgment vanished, their only value being as commodities and objects of speculation"<sup>7</sup>. Today, an artist needs to spend most of her time peddling her goods, convincing art critics and art patrons that

her work is valuable. Great art, on the one hand, has become a commodity, a luxury, afforded only by the rich. On the other, we continue to expect from art redemption and meaning.

It seems that the art world is in a nihilistic crisis. Wilfred Dickhoff suggests that art today needs find a balance “between negation (questioning the whole) and affirmation (sympathy with what is against death, the final goal of all forms of dominance)”<sup>8</sup>. Still, to me this solution does not seem to remedy the problem. Thus, I return to Nietzsche and ask, what if art becomes nihilistic?

“We possess *art*,” Nietzsche says, “lest we *perish of the truth*” (822). Art for Nietzsche is not a search for truth but a departure from it; in fact, art becomes what we turn to in order to escape from the truth. “Truth is ugly” (822); and, “the ugly, i.e., the contradiction to art, that which is excluded from art, ... takes away strength, impoverishes, weighs down—” (809). The truth is embalmed and static. Once truth has been had (or captured), the vitality that accompanies the search for truth is gone. Truth does not give youthful energy. While art celebrates life, truth is sober, weary, and dried-up. Truth closes off roads that could either be other options or paths of understanding. Rather than enlivening the spirits, (Nietzsche would say intoxicating them) truth tries to give final verdict. The real world is “false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, and without meaning” (853.I), and truth in such a world cannot be anything but “ugliness and awfulness” (802). Thus, since truth is ugly, and the ugly is the contradiction of art, art cannot be the search for truth.

Furthermore, nihilism counts as “truth”. Truth, or the pursuit of truth, indicates that there is a highest value for which we should always be striving. Nietzsche denies this. “Truth does not count as the supreme value,” he says “even less as the supreme power” (853.III). The power of art, Nietzsche believes, is in its power not to be right. Art does not distinguish between right and wrong; instead, an artist will mix her paints and then create a new canvas

from confining what was there before. This creative and rejuvenating power of art completely departs from truth. Whereas in truth there is correctness, art has only interpretation and meaning.

“One has to tyrannize in order to produce any effect at all.” (826) Nietzsche believes that in order to create art one needs to tyrannize, but tyrannize what? Is it the other people that one needs to oppress in order to produce an effect? Or is it the genre? Recent art has focused on departures from tradition. Painting well is not considered good art; instead good art is painting in an inventive way. Authenticity and originality come out of a disaffiliation from convention. Nietzsche disagrees. “Every mature art has a host of conventions as its basis—in so far as it is a language. Convention is the condition of great art, not an obstacle—” (809). The practice of an art happens within a convention, not outside of it. Creativity comes from being able to work from the structure of the “language” of the art. One can be a tyrant to an art only after one has mastered the craft. Therefore, an artist will need to develop her craft in order to be able to become creative in it. Success in the arts today is generally synonymous with commercial success, and agents and critics who promote an artist ensure this success. The importance of the development of craft is not given enough weight in the creative process. Art flourishes through the convention of the craft.

“One is an artist at the cost of regarding that which all non-artists call ‘form’ as content, as ‘the matter itself.’” (818) In each work of art, two elements exist: the form and the content. Even though this distinction falls apart under scrutiny<sup>9</sup>, most intuitively, content is *what* is painted, while form is *how*. For an artist, the what is not as important as the how. What does this mean? Does Nietzsche mean that what an artist paints is not important? An artist is given a task, for example, to paint a portrait. Upon being given this task, the painter becomes preoccupied not with what she is going to paint (that is, who the portrait is going to portray,

what portion of the figure is going to take up the canvas, and so forth) but how she is going to paint the figure. That is, the artist will consider *how* she will portray the figure in front of her on the canvas. The painter is given a challenge of representing a figure on a canvas, and now, the painter must take this challenge and make the most out of it.

This challenge does not require that the painter have a firm grasp of truth; instead what the artist needs is mastery of her art (painting in this case) and the artistic dexterity to solve problems that might arise. The artist must lie and deceive, but her lies and deceptions need not be malicious, for the eye lies and deceives when looking at the same object in different perspectives or different contexts. Additionally, the artist must love nuances, for it is the nuances of an art that distinguish a good artist from a great one. With practice and experience, a painter will be able to delineate shades of color or shadow; she will be able to intuit perspective; she will be able to better fool the beholder into seeing her perspective.

“Compared with the *artist*, the appearance of the *scientific* man is actually a sign of a certain damming-up and lowering of the level of life.” (816) A scientist is concerned with truth, with correctness, whereas the artist is concerned with creation. In this respect, the artist is indifferent to truth, is unreasonable, and defies reality. “In creation, however, destruction is included.” (853.III) An artist destroys what is around her in order to create her work, yet through this destruction comes becoming, growing, and shaping of the will. The scientist’s goals, by contrast, are not to create but to test. She examines her results and scrutinizes them to find “truth”.

In this way, Nietzsche believes that artists too are nihilists, yet they are active nihilists. That is, their nihilism works “tonically, increases strength, inflames desire (i.e., the feeling of strength), excites all the more subtle recollections of intoxication” (809), and through this active nihilism destroys the past in order to create anew. Art, qua art, destroys the past in order to

create the new. In order for a painter to paint a canvas, she needs to take a blank canvas and paints, do “damage” to them, and from this damage create a painting from them. She does not paint the way a scientist examines; she does not follow a specific, pre-determined, course<sup>10</sup>; she does not measure and record her activity. Artistic convention allows one to solve problems creatively. Instead, she expresses an emotion through her painting, and such an expression is not possible without a compulsion to create beauty and perfection.

In fragment 814, we get an idea of what Nietzsche expects from the artist.

Artists are *not* men of great passion, whatever they may like to tell us and themselves. And this is for two reasons: they lack any sense of shame before themselves (they observe themselves *while they live*; they spy on themselves, they are too inquisitive) and they also lack any sense of shame before great passion (they exploit it as artists).

An artist has dignity of self and her art and is not self-conscious of either. Just as the unexamined life is not worth living, neither is the hyper-examined one. Philosophers since Heraclitus and Zeno have told us that we cannot watch the arrow fly and examine it at the same time. An artist need not be too concerned with herself or her work. Additionally, the artist should have respect for her art not exploit it.

Only those interested in fame and fortune are shameless and shamelessly exploit their art; whereas her talent humbles the artist. “Secondly, however, their vampire, their talent, grudges them as a rule that squandering of force which one calls passion. —If one has a talent, one is also its victim: one lives under the vampirism of one’s talent.” (814) For, one does not struggle to express talent, but talent overtakes the artist. An artist cannot help but create, for that is in her nature, yet her creations, her paintings, consume her for she is not master to her talent but its slave.

“One does not get over a passion by representing it: rather, it is over *when* one is able to represent it.” (814) Nietzsche disagrees with Goethe in the last line of the fragment, but what

does he mean here? A passion does not die because one is trying to perfect it; instead, a passion dies once it is perfected. The thrill is gone once the chase is over, and an artist who creates un-creatively will soon not have any passion for her art. A painter would paint seascapes until she perfects that genre, and then possibly move on to still lifes, or portraits. One who merely paints seascapes, the same seascapes, without development of style, is not an artist but a producer. She allows for the passion to die. Like truth, the passion becomes sober and stiff rather than intoxicating.

I am not sure where art today is. I think we are too close to ourselves to be able to put ourselves in context. Certainly, consumerism is not as rabid as in the eighties and the nineties. Art has more than economic value, but assessing that value can be quite difficult, especially when economic needs play such an urgent part of our lives. I believe that Nietzsche would think that many of the artists today are not being good active nihilists (though they might so flatter themselves); instead, they are allowing the truth of what it means to become an artist hinder them from the intoxication of art. Art for art's sake is about the process not the finished product. Just because this world is pointless does not keep it from having meaning.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Nehamas, "The Art of Being Unselfish", *Daedalus* 131:4 (Fall 2002) p 68.

<sup>2</sup> Friederich Nietzsche, Fragment 22, "European Nihilism", *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J.Hollingdale, ed., Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books 1968) p 17.

All parenthetical citations refer to the number of the fragment in this translation of Nietzsche's *Will to Power*.

<sup>3</sup> I believe Heidegger, as well, thinks similarly, but the breath of this paper is already too broad and over-ambitious.

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche does not actually use this phrase. Artists, for example, Dada artists, later used the phrase to denote an art that was made not to contain meaning.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher L. E. C. Whitcombe, "What is Art? What is an Artist?", (8 February 1998) <<http://www.arthistory.sbc.edu/artartists/ancmed.html>> (8 December 2002). While some of this information in this paragraph is mine, this article actually summarizes the discussion quite well.

<sup>6</sup> Wilfred Dickhoff, "After Nihilism", *After Nihilism: Essays on Contemporary Art*, ed., Wilfred Dickhoff, (New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) p 78.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p 79.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p 82.

<sup>9</sup> The distinction of style and content is an interesting one. While our intuitions can differentiate the difference initially, the distinction is not clear. Style and content are intimately connected, and the style of an object will effect its meaning as well as the content will effect its style.

<sup>10</sup> Artistic convention allows one to solve problems creatively.