

# Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

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## **Electronic Article**

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## To The Reader

This inaugural issue of *Action, Theory and Criticism for Music Education* is devoted to papers presented at the interdisciplinary colloquium held June 11-15, 2000 in Helsinki Finland by the “MayDay Group” of musicians (MDG) and the “Artist, Work of Art, and Experience” group of artists (AWE). These proceedings were originally published in the *Finnish Journal of Music Education (Musikkikasvatus)*, Vol. 5, No. 1-2 (2000). With the permission of that journal, they are now made accessible to the international community of music education scholars. Two lectures by Professor Richard Shusterman, a leading pragmatist philosopher who has concerned himself centrally with the arts, were arranged by AWE to coincide with the colloquium and produced two interviews by Lauri Väkevää of the University of Oulu, Finland, the second of which is published here for the first time. Thanks are offered to Professor Shusterman for his contribution to the colloquium and for granting permission to publish the interviews.

By way of background, the MayDay Group ([www.maydaygroup.org](http://www.maydaygroup.org)) is a group of international scholars from a variety of disciplines in music and music education. J. Terry Gates, SUNY Buffalo and Thomas A. Regelski, SUNY Fredonia (both now emeritus) created the group in 1993 to consider mounting challenges facing music educators and the status of music in society. Its analytical agenda is to interrogate traditional and status quo conceptions of music and music education from the perspectives of critical theory, critical thinking and research from all relevant disciplines. Its positive agenda is to inspire and promote action for change, both concerning how music and musical value are understood in the contemporary world of music and in the institutions responsible for music in society, particularly music education. The AWE Group (<http://triad.kiasma.fng.fi/awe/WRITINGS/index.html>) includes artists from several disciplines associated with several art schools and universities in Finland who share mutual interest in applying Pragmatism to important issues in art and art theory. Finnish philosopher Pentti Määttänen, a specialist in John Dewey and Charles S. Pierce, has been informal leader of this group.

MayDay colloquia are held once or twice a year, and each explores one of the seven “action ideals” posted on the Group’s website. The Helsinki meeting focused on Ideal Five: “In order to be effective, music educators must establish and maintain contact with ideas and people from other disciplines.” A joint meeting with artists was, therefore, very apt and produced much of mutual value. As a prelude to the colloquium, Professor Claire Detels, a musicologist at the University of Arkansas and a MDG member, agreed to produce a “study paper.” This was drawn directly from her book *Soft Boundaries: Re-Visioning the Arts and Aesthetics in American Education* (Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1999), a critique of how single-disciplinary specialization and scholarly and pedagogical insularity within and between art and music departments of universities and schools have produced negative consequences for the effectiveness of arts and music education. The study paper was not read at the colloquium; but because it was addressed directly by several papers and other participants, it is also included with the proceedings.

Given the commitment of the AWE group to pragmatism and a strong interest on the part of several MDG members in music and music education as *praxis*, a Pragmatist theme evolved that addressed distinctly post-modern, post-analytic and post-structuralist perspectives on art, music and music education. In contrast to the hegemony of modernist aestheticist accounts of art, music and music education, the pragmatist-praxial tone of these proceedings exemplified for the arts a trend in other disciplines that has recently been called “the practice turn.”\* In contrast to the “linguistic turn” of analytic, common language and formal language philosophy that occurred early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this newly burgeoning *practice theory* is concerned with human actions that are organized around praxis and pragmatic values, and that involve shared and embodied understanding, skills and know-how—where, in short, meaning arises in situated conditions of use.

Heidegger, Wittgenstein and a wide array of notable post-analytic, post-modern and post-structuralist philosophers, as well as second-generation critical theorists such as Habermas, have influenced the growth and direction of practice theory. It incorporates recent social philosophy and cultural theory and, in distinction to the rationalist bias of analytic theory, draws on empirical findings from the social sciences and cognitive studies, including neuroscience and consciousness research. The relevance for the arts and for music and music education in particular of this new emphasis on embodied praxis should be obvious; at the very least it offers the promise of new directions for thinking and research regarding the challenges facing music education. Thus, this collection of papers presents a variety of fresh and sometimes competing perspectives that otherwise have been overlooked, minimized, or even denied in many status quo discussions of music and music education. This new and sometimes provocative research is offered in keeping with the MayDay Group’s agenda to facilitate and disseminate new ideas, to continue to promote analysis of and open-minded dialogue about both old and new ideas, and to help effect change for the betterment of music education and music in society.

\* Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike Von Savigny, eds. *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. Routledge: 2001.

Thomas A. Regelski, Editor.

## Pragmatism, Art, and the Real World

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### Introduction



The purpose of this paper is to examine the way in which pragmatist theories of art can be, or ought to be, realistic – though not realistic in any strong metaphysical sense.<sup>1</sup> I argue that artworks should be understood as (1) being parts of the real world, i.e., emergent cultural constructs embodied in material nature; as (2) referring to, or representing, reality (though not exactly in the way in which we take scientific theories or everyday beliefs to be representing reality); and, more reflexively, as (3) being (sometimes) used to intervene in the realism issue itself through problematizing our human ways of representing and cognizing the real world. Here, (3) in particular explicates what I take to be the philosophical relevance of (at least some) works of art. Like transcendental philosophical theories, certain conceptually complex artworks may reflexively investigate the nature and limits of our representations of the world and, hence, their own representational (or non-representational) features.

The form of realism applied to art in the pragmatist approach I shall outline is both ontological, epistemological, and semantic; as a truly pragmatic doctrine, this kind of moderate realism should always remain subordinated to pragmatism. In my view,

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pragmatism functions here as a meta-level (transcendental) standpoint within which it is possible to be a realist about art (or about many other things as well) – roughly in the sense in which it is possible to be an "empirical realist" about the natural world within Kantian "transcendental idealism".

Section 2 below will be devoted to point (1) and section 3 to points (2) and (3). Finally, in section 4, I shall briefly discuss Joseph Margolis's ideas as an example of the kind of pragmatist position I try to formulate. The chief issue with which I am concerned is, thus, the ontology of art in a pragmatist framework. Above all, I wish to emphasize the ontological seriousness of pragmatist theorizing about art, while abandoning all forms of metaphysical realism<sup>2</sup> that take artworks to exist (or to fail to exist) "in themselves" or "as such". In this respect, as we shall see, Margolis's otherwise admirably pragmatist views are somewhat problematic, too.

A final cautionary remark is in order before I begin. Obviously, I cannot hope to *prove* that pragmatism is correct either as a general philosophical position or as a theory of art. Rather than actually defending pragmatism in any systematic way in this paper, I wish to adopt it as my starting point and remind pragmatist theorists of art about the unavoidability of ontological issues and of the transcendental issue of realism, in particular. Whether such an ontologically loaded species of pragmatism (and its linkage to realism) is fruitful or not remains for others to judge. The "truth" of this philosophical view should be tested by its pragmatic outcome – in this case, by its relevance in understanding art and the artworld.

### Art as a Part of the Real World



Realistic ontologies of art are sometimes formulated in terms of Karl Popper's notion of "World 3". With this concept, Popper means to designate the world of human-made cultural artefacts that are not reducible either to the physical world (World 1) or to the subjective states of individual minds (World 2).<sup>3</sup> The key idea here is that works of art, as cultural entities irreducible to mental states or to physical objects and events but nevertheless "embodied" in physical nature and requiring human mental action in order to exist, ought to be regarded as World 3 entities, roughly in the sense in which scientific theories, natural numbers, or societies and institutions are taken to exist in World 3.

Although the Popperian framework is by no means universally accepted, closely related theories of art have been in circulation. Among relatively recent theorists, Arthur Danto (1981, ch. 6) and Arto Haapala (1989, ch. 5) regard *interpretation* as a criterion of the existence and identity of a work of art. Artworks exist only as interpreted. This view can easily be accepted from the point of view of pragmatism and Popperian World 3 ontology: without an "artworld", a social institution or practice within which works are created, received, interpreted, and assessed as works of art, there could be no works of art at all. There would, as Danto argues, only be commonplace objects – say, pieces of matter instead of sculptures or paintings, sounds in the air instead of symphonies, material copies of books and manuscripts instead of poems or novels. The existence of such works *as* works of art necessarily presupposes a complex network of socio-cultural relationships on the cultural level of World 3, irreducible to Worlds 1 and 2. This context, in which all interpretive communication and interaction takes place, enables the entity manifested in material and



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mental reality to emerge as a cultural entity, as a work of art. As cultural entities, works of art, together with their interpretatively relevant structural features, belong to World 3.<sup>4</sup>



Even though Danto and other historically oriented philosophers of art (or most pragmatists, for that matter) do not want to use these terms, we may say that a historically changing interpretative context is *constitutive* of art in the sense in which the *transcendental conditions* for the possibility of some given phenomenon are, in a Kantian way, constitutive of the phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> What I want to defend, through the notion of World 3, is a

transcendentally motivated pragmatic and cultural realism about artworks, not a metaphysically realist picture of some basic structure of reality in itself. To distinguish my claim that artworks belong to World 3 (and, thus, to the real world) from the metaphysical



realist's much stronger existence claims, my statement can be understood as a pragmatic proposal regarding the way we should conceptually structure the cultural reality we have ourselves created. We should not forget that all our ontological decisions are pragmatic and deeply value-laden (see Pihlström 1996). The "reality" or "nature" of what artists and their audiences do can be described in many different ways, and some of these descriptions are (pragmatically) more relevant than some others.<sup>6</sup> To make my thesis more precise, it may be formulated as stating that artworks are real and belong to World 3, *if* a suitable language, conceptual scheme, or theoretical framework (whose rationality and acceptability we must, of course, critically discuss) is chosen by us in order for us to be able to study and evaluate art in an interesting and efficient way. Apart from all such purpose-oriented schemes and frameworks, reality, and *a fortiori* the entire humanly constructed cultural reality that

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contains artworks, is nothing to us. I am not claiming, then, as the metaphysical realist perhaps would, that artworks exist "essentially", "as such", "in themselves", or that they belong to the "furniture of the world" – or that they do not exist in this sense. What I am claiming, in the spirit of the ontological tolerance essential to pragmatic realism, is that there are as good pragmatic reasons for tolerating their existence as there are for tolerating the existence of such entities as electrons, genes, natural numbers, thoughts, social institutions, or nations.

Of course, by pragmatically admitting such entities as works of art into our ontologies, we have to dispense with the ideal of ontological parsimony. Yet, as tolerant, pluralistic pragmatists, this is precisely what we should do. The fact that an entity is postulated as real by a literary critic or an art historian and not by a physicist or a molecular biologist – that is, within some particular normative practice rather than some other normative practice - does not make it any less real than the postulations of the physicist or the biologist. On the other hand, clearly, there must be some limitations to what kinds of entities are responsibly acceptable even for the pragmatically oriented World 3 ontologist. Undoubtedly there are false theories about the nature of art. We have quite good reasons for rejecting the idealist doctrine that works of art are spiritual, immaterial entities in the mind of the artist (i.e., in World 2), existing independently of any World 1 basis or World 3 cultural network. A simple application of the pragmatic method – pragmatists' central philosophical tool – leads us to seriously doubt the coherence of this idea. What in the world would such spiritual entities be? What kind of practical results (e.g., regarding our enhanced understanding of art) could be expected by their postulation? How could we, or anyone, be

aware of anything like that? If these pure World 2 entities were intended to function as works of art, how could they, as subjective states, ever be interpreted by anyone except the artist her- or himself?

Furthermore, even if we emphasize the importance of *aesthetic experience* as constitutive of art, as is customary in pragmatist aesthetics (cf., e.g., Shusterman 1992), we should not identify artworks with subjective World 2 experiences of individual persons (whether artists or members of the audience). What we need is a wider notion of experience understood as something that can only be adequately discussed in culturalist World 3 terms. Such a notion has, of course, been developed in the pragmatist tradition from James and Dewey to Shusterman and other contemporary pragmatists, without overlooking the fact that artistic and other humanly significant experiences are not only culturally loaded but parts of "human nature" as well.<sup>7</sup> In this tradition, experience has always been discussed in relation to habitual human practices, never in relation to an abstract individual mind facing an external world independently of socio-cultural relations.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in my view, it is somewhat ambiguous to characterize pragmatist theories of art by saying that they treat works of art as "rather experiences than objects", while it is of course correct to say that, according to pragmatism, "art is an essential part of life and society and should be analysed in the context of social and cultural practices and institutions".<sup>9</sup> The picture of pragmatism I wish to put forward here is an ontologically committed one: neither in relation to art nor elsewhere should pragmatists try to avoid ontological seriousness. In this sense artworks are,

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for pragmatists, "objects", but they are objects that can never be torn apart from our culturally loaded human experiences of artistic and other aesthetic values.

If what I have said is on the right track, then there should be no obstacle to a moderately realistic ontological investigation of art in a pragmatist setting, as soon as we give up all metaphysically realistic ontologies according to which artworks belong or do not belong to the fundamental furniture of the world (see also section 4 below). What is more, there should be no need to contrast aesthetic experiences and the cognitive and conceptual functions of art; the latter can, in pragmatism, be understood in experiential terms. It is one of tasks of a pragmatically realistic theory of art to say something about the latter functions of art, too.

### **Art as Referring to the Real World – and to the Problem of Reference**

Despite the above-described ontological tolerance associated with pluralistic pragmatism which approaches reality in experiential and irreducibly socio-cultural terms, the pragmatist ontologist of art must explain why there cannot be anything whatsoever in the world. She or he must be prepared to make substantial ontological statements and to argue for them, despite her contention that there is no absolute (metaphysical) way of settling ontological disputes in the sense dreamed of by metaphysical realists. In particular, the pragmatist will have to decide whether the specific human practice referred to as the artworld is related to something extra-artistically real or not. Pieces of art, e.g., paintings or fictional works of literature, very often describe imagined people and states of affairs;

nevertheless, it appears that they in most cases do have something to say about the "real world" (i.e., the world that lies outside the artworld or of which the latter is a part).

It is often asked, therefore, whether we should think that there is some sort of a semantic (or, more generally, semiotic or symbolizing) relation between an artwork and the external reality it is "about". Can a piece of art tell us something about the world, provide us with knowledge about it, show us something? My own view is, unsurprisingly, affirmative: art, realistically construed, is a symbolic means of referring to reality, especially to humanly significant moral problems and other parts of the cultural world we live in. Of course, since artworks themselves are parts of reality (i.e., belong to World 3, as explained above), art may refer to art itself, and works can refer to one another. According to this realistic picture, works of art can genuinely be *about* other works of art, that is, not merely quote them or allude to them. But if the semantic dimension of realism is taken seriously in the philosophy of art, it must be admitted that art can also refer to, or be about, the extra-artistic world, things and events that are not themselves artworks.<sup>10</sup>

Such a realist position affirming the (possible) referentiality of art has by no means been generally accepted among philosophers of art. In the twentieth century analytic philosophy of art in particular, an *aestheticist* conception of the autonomy and practical "uselessness" of artworks has been dominant. It has been almost a dogma that artworks ought to be detached from their social, cultural and historical background (i.e., from the "reality" environing them) and analyzed "as they are in themselves". One of the clearest expressions of this view was formulated in the school known as "new criticism" in the theory of literature. Contrary to this pure aestheticism, one may argue that artworks are in

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fact among the most useful things we human beings have (cf. Wolterstorff 1987). This is a natural view for the pragmatist to adopt, as pragmatists usually oppose sharp dichotomies between the aesthetic and the practical (see, again, Shusterman 1992). Aestheticist philosophy of art is, from a pragmatic perspective, extremely one-sided in failing to draw attention to the enormous value that works of art (may) possess in the interaction between people and their environment. Our relation to the world would probably be entirely different from what it is, had we no enjoyable music, literature or pictorial art at our disposal. This pragmatist position, which emphasizes the practical value of art and aesthetic experiences in people's lives, need not lead to a narrowly instrumentalist view, which would regard art as only instrumentally valuable. Our human practices can be oriented toward aims that are (non-instrumentally) valuable in themselves, such as the *understanding* of our lives and the world. This is also what the aims and purposes of the practices of art and art criticism may be like. Were such values not in place in the artworld, art would be too far from, and irrelevant to, human life at large. We humans would hardly like to produce or receive such works of art.

We have thus preliminarily formulated a pragmatically realistic account of the role of art in our (forms of) life. Artworks are, as was explained, parts of the world. But this is not enough. To be valuable from the viewpoint of the human life taking place within that same world, they ought to be able to *refer* to that very real world. Some theorists have, indeed, argued against aestheticism and related views that works of art may offer us *knowledge* about reality – perhaps not primarily propositional knowledge, but rather "practical" knowledge of human values, attitudes, and moral problems.<sup>11</sup> It would, then, be

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illusory to see a gap between art and reality. In fact, many artists have regarded "truthfulness" as one of the key tasks of art: a profound, perceptive description of the world possibly connected with a genuine (though often indirect and implicit) ethical assessment.<sup>12</sup> It would not be easy to understand the work of many artists without presupposing a moderately realistic philosophy of art like this. Even if we are not prepared to say, for instance, that literature equippes us with knowledge, we may still consider literature relevant or perhaps even necessary in the acquisition of *moral* knowledge, in particular (insofar as there can be such a species of knowledge at all).<sup>13</sup> Detaching art completely from the humanly inevitable ethical sphere of life may in the end be based on an immoral philosophy of art. In order to be ethically acceptable as a responsible human practice among other practices, art cannot step beyond morality or judge ethical concerns aesthetically irrelevant (see also Shusterman 1992).

Still, in emphasizing the ethical and cognitive functions of art I by no means want to subscribe to any version of the classical *mimesis* theory, according to which artworks just copy or reproduce reality, creating "verisimile" illusions. The kind of realism that is to be subordinated to pragmatism (if my proposal is correct) need not presuppose any detailed copying of an external reality. Artistic "knowledge" and "truth" (or "understanding") certainly differ from scientific knowledge, but in neither case do we encounter simple relations of copying. It would, nonetheless, be quite overhasty to claim that artworks do not bear any cognitive or semantic relations to an external world at all. At least this aestheticist

statement does not follow from the fact that art cannot be reduced to a sheer copying of reality.

It should now emerge quite clearly that the view I take to be basic to a pragmatist philosophy of art is in a sharp opposition to several postmodernist and poststructuralist ideas associated with the study of art and literature. *Pace* such highly influential thinkers as, say, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida (whose writings I am of course unable to discuss in any detail here), we should think not only that art is a part of the real world (as argued in section 2 above) but also that there indeed is a world external to a work of art – a world, moreover, to which the work may bear a semantic relation of reference, representation, or even truth, and about which the work can therefore offer us knowledge or understanding.

It goes naturally with this realism to claim, again *contra* most "postmodernists", that artworks cannot be interpreted in any manner whatsoever. Even though the author's intention and the meanings she or he has "given" to the text cannot dictate any single correct interpretation, it would be wildly implausible to deny their relevance altogether. In this sense, the author should not be declared to be dead, at least not according to any reasonably pragmatist philosophy of art.<sup>14</sup> There always is, or has been, a genuine subject who has produced the work, a flesh-and-blood human being living in a complex natural and cultural world. This subject, as well as the relatively objective cultural network that is the context of her or his artistic activity (the artworld), must inevitably be taken into account in interpretation. The biographistic tradition of art interpretation one-sidedly emphasizes the life of the author, whereas those postmodernists and deconstructionists who

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talk about the death of the author have stressed the autonomy of a culturally loaded "text"

 without any "hors-texte". Both extremes should be avoided. On the other hand, if postmodernists merely remind us of the fact that works of art never have any unique, metaphysically privileged Right Interpretations, I see no reason for a pragmatist to oppose them. Assuming that artworks can refer to reality and be practically (for instance, cognitively or ethically) valuable for us in our coping with reality, the pragmatist certainly tolerates different, perhaps conflicting interpretations of good works of art. She or he thus quite naturally tolerates the plurality and openness of human creative activities.

A critic of my approach might claim that we have gone too far in insisting on the referential and cognitive features of art. Isn't science concerned with producing knowledge about the world and art with something else? Do not scientific theories, rather than artworks, refer (or at least purport to refer) to reality – don't they, at least, do this completely differently from works of art? Here we may take a brief look at how the pragmatist can employ the notion of reference. As Hilary Putnam (1992, 1994) has argued (to my mind convincingly), this notion cannot be analyzed simply in causal and physical (natural-scientific) terms, as some philosophers have recently proposed; more generally, there is no metaphysical essence of reference, no single, privileged way in which the linguistic entities (or symbols in general) we use refer to non-linguistic parts of the world.<sup>15</sup> This is so, according to Putnam, because, in a Wittgensteinian fashion, different *uses* of language may, in their different ways, refer to reality – or, better, to reality as it is seen from those different perspectives constituted by language-use. The various modes of reference available to us may bear "family resemblance" relations to each other in

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Wittgenstein's sense. In the end, the concept of reference cannot be "defined" (any better than the concept of truth can): it is an open concept with many different manifestations in actual human language-uses. Still, reference is not anything illusory. Referring to the world is something that really takes place in many kinds of linguistically mediated human affairs, and we entirely naturally use our language to refer to worldly objects and events. What

pragmatism, mixed with a healthy portion of Wittgensteinian language-game oriented philosophy of language, teaches us is to avoid any mystification of our natural ability to refer to the world – by our everyday, scientific, artistic (and other) symbol systems.

Putnam does not explicitly discuss artistic reference in his defense of this non-reductive and non-essentialist view. We can, however, think about, say, fictional literature as a language-game (or perhaps as a family of language-games, paying attention to distinctions between genres of literature) in which language is used in certain distinctive

ways in order to refer to the world, differently from the way in which scientific theories or everyday speech acts refer. Employing Nelson Goodman's (1978, 1984) terms, the pragmatist philosopher of art may contend that scientific and artistic ways of constructing "world-versions" are very different, but equally acceptable, and the resulting versions (or "worlds") may be regarded as equally "actual". In particular, the scientific ones are not "more real" than the artistic ones. Both science and art are, then, practices of "worldmaking" in a Goodmanesque sense; both can aim at truth or (more generally) pragmatic "rightness". Science, then, enjoys no privileged position of speaking about reality as it is in itself any more than art (or some other cultural practice seriously engaged in by humans) does. There in a sense is no such reality at all, if the pragmatist's opposition

to metaphysical realism is taken seriously.<sup>16</sup> The pragmatist, moreover, regards questions about the rightness of both scientific and artistic world-versions as inherently valuational questions. The concept of a work of art is, she or he should be prepared to argue, a value-laden concept. There is, after all, no value-neutral way of "defining" art (cf. again also Shusterman 1992). One of artists' important tasks is to inquire into how values – all kinds of values: aesthetic, ethical, epistemic, and so forth – are manifested in our world. Artists ought not to close their eyes. This ethically relevant role of art results from the referential features of artworks we have discussed.<sup>17</sup>

The value-ladenness of art can be recognized even independently of pragmatism, although a pragmatist overall position certainly helps in recognizing it. The literary theorist Stein Haugom Olsen (1987) has argued that the concept of a literary work of art should be understood as an evaluative concept. Works of literature are, in his view, intentional and institutional objects, and the literary institution they belong to is defined by a normative structure of rules. To say that an object is a work of literature is to relate it to a human practice and human purposes; the interpretation and evaluation of the work are inextricably intertwined. Interpretation requires aesthetic evaluation and aims at finding the value that the work may possess. Olsen even encourages us to abandon the notion of the "meaning" of a literary work altogether. The correct way of approaching literature is "appreciation", since it is precisely the appreciation of literary works in the institution of literature that makes them such works in the first place. At this point we might ask: How is artistic value produced? Why is literature valuable? According to Olsen, the practice of literature and the

very concept of literature are constituted by the assumption that "a literary work should say something about the world, about central human concerns, about 'the human predicament'" (p. 160). Literature, as distinguished from mere fiction, is humanly significant.<sup>18</sup> It cannot be reduced to the themes dealt with by philosophical and religious works, but it is closely connected with them. I believe, with Olsen, that it is precisely for this reason that we actually produce and receive not only literature but all kinds of artworks. By means of art, we try to conceptualize our existence in this world. We try to understand what it is like to be a human being in a human world. There can hardly be a more pragmatic task ahead of us (cf. here further Pihlström 1998).

It is, presumably, for the same reason that we produce and consume religious and philosophical texts – as well as, perhaps, scientific ones, too. To be sure, the strategies employed and the aims pursued in these parts of culture differ substantially. Still, within the artistic framework, pieces of art can and should be evaluated on the basis of how successfully they describe and problematize the human existence they themselves arise out of, even though this need not be the only relevant criterion in artistic evaluation. Now,

 arguable, this requirement is applicable only if art is understood in the moderately realistic way I have suggested, since otherwise artworks cannot really be "about" human life in any significant sense. Furthermore, no one (especially not the pragmatist) should overlook the fact that some features of our world are better captured in artistic descriptions than in scientific ones (and *vice versa*). Our inevitable human condition, *death*, may be one of these. We might think that death is a necessary condition for there being any morally relevant problem concerning the value or significance of a human life. It can be compared

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to a limit which enables us to pose such questions in the first place. Therefore, it may indefinitely escape scientific scrutiny and even philosophical (that is, conceptual, analytical, and theoretical) treatment. Yet, some poets, novelists, playwrights and other artists have built their entire artistic visions around the theme of death. By so doing they have succeeded in artistically describing a key element of our world, a (transcendental) condition for our even meaningfully asking whether our life or the world has any value or significance.

There is still a further dimension to the kind of pragmatic realism about art that I favor. Not only can art refer to the world in general or to the moral and other humanly important problems constitutive of our being-in-the-world. Not only can artworks lead us to see such problems in a new light. They can even discuss profoundly philosophical problems concerning their or any other symbol systems' very ability to do this (although they will, clearly, have to do this from a manner different from systematic and theoretical philosophical discussions). For example, George Orwell's famous novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), has been described as the strongest challenge to anti-realism ever written.<sup>19</sup> In this case, we can say that a work of art implicitly challenges itself in a self-referential manner, thereby seeking to justify itself: as a devastating critique of anti-realist views that refuse to acknowledge any independent, opinion-transcendent truth or reality, Orwell's novel also criticizes those views which would deny *its* ability to refer to and describe a world not entirely of our own making (i.e., its status as a piece of realistic art). It is precisely because *Nineteen Eighty-Four* describes humanity in the horrifying way it does that it succeeds in convincingly formulating the important philosophical point that there is a

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world to be perceived, described and understood (instead of merely to be constructed) by human beings by experiential, linguistic and conceptual means. Hence, arguably, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reflexively defends the possibility of (pragmatically) realistic art, perhaps even better than many contemporary artworks whose explicit reflexivity is often somewhat artificial.<sup>20</sup> More concretely, artworks can (reflexively) criticize aestheticist conceptions of art and artificial oppositions between (allegedly "higher") world-transcending aesthetic experiences and real-life moral problems. If an artwork succeeds in such a critique, it *ipso facto* justifies itself as a morally responsible human action.<sup>21</sup>

By describing a reality of genuine value problems, in particular ethical ones, art may increase our moral understanding, including our understanding of the moral tasks and limits of art itself. There can hardly be any absolutely conclusive argument demonstrating the importance of this ethical point of view in art; it may not be possible to justify such a point of view to a person who simply does not care about it. But pragmatists emphasizing the practical significance of artworks need not be able to conclusively refute their opponents by means of a knock-down argument. They can just urge that it is their pragmatic view, rather than the non-pragmatists' one, that is itself pragmatically justified. It is a pragmatic move to adopt a pragmatist view of art – and even this reflexivity could perhaps be artistically examined. The pragmatic fruits of this position can be seen in its ability to discuss art in moral terms, which is of course something that the critic of pragmatism may not want to do at all. What we have here is an inevitably circular defense of pragmatism. But, as I stated already in the beginning, it is not my purpose to defend

pragmatism non-circularly against its possible opponents. Rather, I am making my remarks about the ethical point of view in art from within the pragmatist perspective.

Now, admittedly, some art enthusiasts might want to restrict the use of the term "art" to the designation of some purely aesthetic activity in which no cognitive, ethical, conceptual, practical (or, in general, non-aesthetic) interests would play any role whatsoever. This extreme possibility must be left open by the pragmatist, too, since (again) no conclusive or non-circular demonstration of the superiority of the pragmatist account is forthcoming – and since no argument regarding terminology is necessary here at all. Such (perhaps only imagined) aesthetes would, however, need to face Danto's (1981) famous thesis about the "end" of art, about its transformation into philosophy *via* contemporary highly conceptualized art. If we want to be able to say, *pace* Danto, that art (or the history of art) has not yet come to its end, we have to pragmatically acknowledge the entanglement of our artistic, cognitive, and moral values and purposes. This view leaves plenty of room for art history to develop along with the more general historical development of human life and societies.

At this point, a critic could perhaps claim that I have betrayed my own pluralistic pragmatism (cf. Pihlström 1996, 1998) by stressing so strongly the referentiality of artworks. Why should reference and representation be central in art? Doesn't art function in our lives in many different ways? Don't we have to give up the referentialist point of view especially if we are willing to endorse pragmatism? After all, art offers us strong emotional experiences, makes us believe (or stop believing) in the meaningfulness of life, comforts us, turns us on, intensifies our feelings, and so forth. However, if we do not think about the

referentiality of art as any kind of metaphysical essence of art, and if we stop searching for a metaphysical essence of reference and representation themselves (as I have suggested we should), we can accommodate the multiple functions of art within our pragmatically referentialist view. It is precisely because of its open-ended, multifarious referentiality that art succeeds in doing all the nice things that it in fact does to us. So, we should locate the kind of referentiality of art that is acceptable to the pragmatist firmly within the more inclusive pragmatistic and pluralistic framework through which pragmatists wish to deal with all human practices and their relations to reality at large. Referring to the world is not the *essence* of art any more than the existence of normative regularities is the essence of language. In both cases, the relevant "essence" can be realized in actual life in indefinitely many ways. Our critique of anti-realism, fictionalism, and aestheticism should not, then, slide toward a naive essentialism or metaphysical realism. Furthermore, as should be clear on the basis of what has been said in this section, the "referentiality" of art I am willing to defend must be understood so broadly that it applies even to artworks which critically comment upon the issue of reference itself in human life and culture – including (post)modernist works standardly taken to be "non-referential". There is much more to the issue of referentiality and non-referentiality of artworks than meets the eye, at least if we admit that it is possible for us to refer (artistically) not only to events of natural life but also to cultural formations created by humans, e.g., to (other) artworks and to philosophical problems (about art or about anything else).

### A Concluding Note on Margolis and Danto

I do not pretend to have expressed any entirely novel or surprising thoughts about the relation between artworks and the real world in the remarks presented above. On the contrary, the type of view I have defended, or at least views closely resembling it, have been put forward earlier in the tradition of pragmatism. Much of what I have said is, to my mind, compatible with what Joseph Margolis has argued for several decades, as well as with Arthur Danto's even better known position (even though the latter is not usually classified as a pragmatist one). I shall conclude my investigation of the ontological features of the pragmatist theory of art by a brief critical reflection on Margolis's recent critique of Danto.

Among contemporary philosophers of art, Margolis has perhaps more emphatically than any other advocated an ontological theory in which artworks are regarded as emergent (but embodied) constructs belonging to the historically developing world of human culture (see, e.g., Margolis 1995). A related idea was formulated in Danto's (1964, 1981) now classical conception of the artworld. The pragmatist may easily accept the view that the ontological identity of artworks lies in their being constantly (re)interpreted within the artworld – that is, in their belonging to a human practice with a history and with certain (historically changing) ends in view. Such a historical practice is a (quasi-)transcendental condition for their possibility *qua* artworks. This idea was already discussed in section 2 above. The ontology of art should, I have tried to argue, be subordinated to a pragmatist analysis of ontology in general, according to which *any* ontological commitment is in the last analysis grounded in pragmatic considerations of

purposive efficacy and fruitfulness (see Pihlström 1996). I believe this statement is not far from Margolis's position.

Margolis (1998), however, has attacked Danto's theory of art by claiming that it leads to an anti-realist conception of both artworks and human selves: there "really" are, in Danto's view (on Margolis's interpretation), no artworks (or selves), since artworks are,  in Danto's terms, only "transfigurations" of "mere real things". Margolis claims, in effect, that no ontology of art can be found in Danto's work except an eliminativist one, according to which "artworks simply do not exist" (p. 371). Danto "views art as the *rhetorical* effect of an artist's treating some 'real thing' metaphorically", as a work of art (p. 374). This is how Margolis contrasts Danto's and Nelson Goodman's positions, both of which he finds hopeless:

[...] Danto claims [...] that there are (there exist), as such, no artworks [...]. Apparently, for Danto, it is only by the *rhetorical imputation of certain non-discernible 'attributes'* that we are ever justified in treating 'mere real things' (things that are *not* artworks) *as* artworks. *Nothing really exists as an artwork*. Goodman admits real artworks, but loses (or diminishes) the run of their perceptual properties; and Danto saves what we ordinarily mean to include as the distinctive properties of artworks, but he voluntarily abandons the existence of artworks as such, and, with that, the literal relevance of ever speaking of the perceptual discernibility of '*their*' properties. (p. 365)

I have to admit that I am somewhat puzzled by Margolis's employment of the phrase "as such", which is, *prima facie*, a phrase that a pragmatist ontologist should avoid. Similarly, Margolis could have taken a more pragmatic attitude to Danto's ideas in order to really *use* them instead of sticking to the problems created by their specific formulation (which is, admittedly, problematic from the point of view of ontologically serious pragmatism). In a word, Margolis might, it seems to me, have adopted a more thoroughgoing pragmatism in relation to (Danto's theory of) artworks. Whatever Danto's original position may have been, the pragmatist philosopher of art is free to reinterpret the notion of transfiguration in an ontological (and transcendental) way: it is our historically developing practice of transfiguring "the commonplace" that yields culturally real emergent products we refer to as artworks and without which those products could not have come about.<sup>22</sup> The pragmatist may argue, *pace* Margolis, that a (pragmatically) realistic ontology of art emerges from what Danto (1964) calls the "is of artistic identification" (cf. Margolis 1998, pp. 366, 371). She or he may, that is, suggest that the existence of artworks emerges from and is transcendently dependent on our treating certain things as artworks – things that are, *as such*, identified as nothing specific, neither as "mere real things" nor as artworks. Whatever we take to exist *as* something must always already have been conceptualized by us as some thing or another within our human (cultural and historically developing) practices. This is perhaps the most basic idea underlying any pragmatist ontology, transcendently interpreted.

It is in this transcendental or constitutive sense that ontology is, for pragmatists, deeply tied to our practices. The assumption that there is "something" (e.g., "mere real

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things") existing "as such" prior to their being conceptualized as anything – i.e., prior to any specific ontological commitment rooted in a human practice – is an assumption that only a metaphysical realist can make. Hence, pragmatically (re)interpreted, the picture Danto offers us is not an eliminative or fictionalist account of the non-existence of artworks. Instead, it can be seen as a picture of how the existence of artworks pragmatically requires purposive human action, conceptual work – that is, a cultural level of human action, the artworld, which functions as the transcendental background rendering art possible for us.<sup>23</sup>

In any event, we pragmatists should join Margolis in rejecting the non-pragmatist idea (whether it is Danto's or not) that there are "really" only mere real (physical) things which are only later identified (but are never "really" taken to be) works of art (see pp. 366 – 367). Such a metaphysics of art would actually amount to an "error theory" paralleling error theories of moral values: according to such a view, there is, truly and ultimately, only a physical world (Popper's World 1), even though some elements of that world are (mistakenly or, at best, "imaginatively") taken to be works of art (or other cultural objects on the level of World 3). A critique of this anti-realist or fictionalist ontology of art (as well as the parallel critique of a fictionalist conception of values) should be a part of our more general pragmatist critique of metaphysical realism. There is, indeed, a quick pragmatic argument to be offered against such fictionalism: "Why (I ask myself) should dealers, galleries, museums buy and sell paintings at all if what Danto says is true is true? Surely, the great prices paid for Picassos and Van Goghs would be a very grave risk if paintings *were not real* – 'ontologically', to favor Danto's idiom [...]",

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Margolis writes (p. 368). Analogously, a similar argument works against any non-pragmatic attempt to eliminate some part of our cultural World 3 from what is real. What is troublesome in Margolis's critique is merely his finding the very notion of existence "as such" useful and his resulting attack on Danto. What a more self-consciously pragmatist philosopher of art can do is simply to admit that our transfiguring activity constitutes (in a transcendental sense, as already explained) ineliminably real cultural entities, such as artworks – entities that would not be possible without such activity.

This is not to deny that Margolis makes an important point that any pragmatist should pay attention to: pragmatic or cultural realism about artworks cannot be separated from a pragmatic or cultural realism about human selves. "I say you cannot disjoin the 'ontologies' of selves and artworks, because, like language and action, artworks are the culturally apt *utterances* of culturally formed selves (ourselves)" (p. 370). This observation is closely related to what was suggested in section 3 above. Art is one of our highly important human means to refer to reality, to utter something about how things are, morally or otherwise, in the real world – our human world. It is also, more reflexively, a means of problematizing this referential relationship itself (as we saw). It is, then, only natural that a theory of art must be closely linked to a theory of human selves who produce and consume art and are able to experience aesthetic values. The prospects of the latter theory and its relation to pragmatism cannot, of course, be dealt with in this essay.

Let me conclude by noting that contemporary conceptual art in a way asks the very ontological question we have been asking in this paper: what is art? It asks, in brief,

whether it (art) is itself real – and, more transcendently, what sort of conditions make it possible as what it is, i.e., as art. This reflexive way of posing some of the most general ontological questions related to art obviously resemble transcendental reflections on how we are able to use language meaningfully (while all the time using it), how we can have cognitive experiences of the world (while all the time having them), and so forth. In an art museum (or in a concert, or when reading a literary work of art), we are often able to confront the very ontological issue regarding the existence of art, while being all the time convinced that artworks do exist, seeking (both philosophically and artistically) the transcendental conditions for their possibility as such cultural entities. Pragmatist theories of art may teach us that this issue should be taken seriously even if we have come to the (pragmatic) conclusion that artworks ought to be conceptualized dynamically in experiential and socio-cultural terms. By no means, then, is pragmatism a "post-philosophical" way of thinking about art (or about anything else); on the contrary, it encourages us to dig deeply into the most basic philosophical questions we can ask about a humanly important practice such as art.<sup>24</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> On pragmatic realism about art, cf. further Pihlström (1996), ch. 5.2, and (1998), ch. 9.5. This paper is partly based on and overlaps these earlier works of mine.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of "metaphysical realism" is here used in a rather pejorative sense, though I shall make no detailed attempt to define it. The contrast between metaphysical and internal (or pragmatic) realism has, as is well known, been formulated by Hilary Putnam in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead of attempting to show that metaphysical realism is false (or, better, meaningless), I should like to refer to Putnam's works (in which art is not too much

discussed, though) and my earlier critical discussions of them: cf., e.g., Putnam (1978), (1992), and (1994), as well as Pihlström (1996) and (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Popper himself does not discuss art in any detail. On World 3, see, e.g., Niiniluoto (1999); cf. also Pihlström (1996), ch. 5. We should not take the Popperian three-world ontology too literally; it is, rather, only a heuristic tool to be used in order to emphasize the irreducibility of the mental and cultural "levels" of existence.

<sup>4</sup> Not only artworks themselves, but certain theoretical features that can be posited in them by researchers taking a realistic attitude to their objects of study, can be said to belong to World 3. For instance, in the framework of literary criticism, we may suggest that implied authors, implied readers, authorial personas and similar theoretical entities of narratology and reader-response criticism are denizens of World 3. Since World 3 entities can be regarded as real, since unobservable theoretical entities can be regarded as real (if we endorse scientific realism, *contra* skeptical empiricist restrictions), and since narratological entities like implied authors (etc.) are human-made cultural constructions in World 3 and also unobservable postulations of literary theory, we may conclude that they are real theoretical World 3 entities and that, more generally, there can be theoretical entities of humanistic research to be found in World 3. As World 3 entities, implied authors and implied readers are structural features of the text, sets of normative properties created and maintained in our cultural practice of producing and receiving literature. They are theoretical entities, since they cannot be observed directly by merely looking at the text. They exist in the theoretically discernible structure of the literary work, which is of course dependent on the semantic properties of the language used in writing the work – properties that are, in turn, based on social conventions of linguistic meaning and ultimately on the life of the relevant linguistic (and artistic) community. Thus, they are products of our human culture, transcending all individual members of that culture. Unlike fictitious characters, however, they are genuinely objects of narratological study. The fact that they are, in a way, constructed on the basis of the text or an analysis of the text poses no problems to the "narratological realist" who accepts the reality of World 3. All World 3 entities are constructions, and it is only natural that human sciences inquire into such human-made constructions. Moreover, since World 3 is a dynamical and constantly changing cultural realm, dependent on the entire social and cultural *praxis* we engage in, it is not necessary to suppose that narratology should uncover any universal categories or essential, unchanging structures of narrative texts. The identity of both literary works and of their narratological entities is dependent on interpretation, and interpretation is always a dynamical World 3 process, open to change. (For a more comprehensive elaboration of this argument in relation to the problem of scientific realism, I refer the reader to Pihlström 1996, ch. 5.2.)

<sup>5</sup> For example, Kantian categories of understanding are constitutive of empirical objects in this way.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, it is hardly relevant at all to describe a work of art from the perspective of fundamental physics, presenting the basic molecular (or even quantum) structure of (say) a

painting. To put it in another way, such a description cannot be a description of its object *as* a work of art.

<sup>7</sup> The culturally oriented pragmatist theory I have briefly described need not deny Shusterman's insistence on the need of *both* a naturalist *and* a culturalist or historicist point of view in understanding the nature of art. According to Shusterman (2000), the idea of art as "dramatization" – as staging or framing – integrates these two viewpoints often unnecessarily opposed to one another. It is, in my view, part and parcel of the pragmatist tradition to refuse to draw any sharp distinction between "nature" and "culture". Art as an intensification of natural human experiences can, through entirely natural human life, be turned into culturally "high" traditions and institutions of art.

<sup>8</sup> We may note in passing that, in discussing experience, pragmatists like Shusterman (1992) often employ, perhaps unintentionally, what looks like transcendental argumentation: for instance, Shusterman argues that an experiencing subject is a necessary condition for the value and meaningfulness of artworks and that (*contra* Rorty) we need a unified picture of the self in order to account for the (Rortyan) ideal of "ironic aesthetic life".

<sup>9</sup> These phrases are taken from the brochure of the AWE Symposium (where this paper was first presented).

<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it should be perceived that this idea of referentiality does not preclude (some) artworks from referring (perhaps only) to themselves – as well as to their ability to refer to an extra-artistic reality (or to their lack of such an ability). I shall return to this topic in a moment.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., e.g., Putnam (1978). In the Finnish discussion, Dr. Markus Lammenranta has defended this view, emphasizing further that since knowledge is more important than aesthetic experience, artworks should mainly be evaluated on the basis of their cognitive function.

<sup>12</sup> This is how I am tempted to read, for example, Milan Kundera's (1986) reflections on his own work. According to Kundera, the novelist shows us human possibilities by introducing "experimental" figures and situations.

<sup>13</sup> "Moral understanding" might be a more appropriate notion here, since, according to some moral philosophers, talk about "knowledge" in relation to ethics leads us astray (cf., e.g., Gaita 1991).

<sup>14</sup> The issue of the "death of the author" is critically discussed, among others, by Shusterman (1986), Olsen (1987), and Haapala (1989).

<sup>15</sup> See Pihlström (1996a), ch. 5.3, for a discussion of Putnam's views on reference and his disputes with physicalists.

<sup>16</sup> Goodman's views of worldmaking are, of course, highly controversial and should, perhaps, be taken no more literally than Popper's talk about the "three worlds". For a critical discussion, see Pihlström (1996), ch. 4.4., and (1998), ch. 1.

<sup>17</sup> The view that art contains an ethical dimension (and is thus indistinguishable from the morally problematic human life) is also a profoundly Wittgensteinian theme (cf. here especially Tilghman 1991). A work of art may make us see reality *sub specie aeternitatis* – not, needless to say, in the metaphysical realist's way, but in a human, morally concerned way

with an openness to life's value and significance (or, possibly, to its lack of value and significance). We might perhaps think of a work of art as showing (that is, not directly stating) such a cosmic perspective as a perspective of an individual human being, developing toward the production of that very work. That is, a good artwork might be able to show us the significance of the life that has led up to its production.

<sup>18</sup> For this reason, a philosophically motivated distinction between high and popular art should, in my view, be maintained (*pace* Shusterman's, 1992, defense of popular art on the basis of pragmatist aesthetics). This issue cannot, however, be discussed in the present paper.

<sup>19</sup> The charge is, of course, that the anti-realist's position does not differ from O'Brien's. See Mounce's (1997, ch. 13) critique of Rorty's (1989) extreme pragmatism on this basis.

<sup>20</sup> I do not, of course, want to propose any thesis about the absolutely "correct" way of reading Orwell's work, since good novels are usually open to several fruitful interpretations.

<sup>21</sup> This is not to deny that the relevance of art to "real life" ethical and social issues can receive monstrous interpretations. Think about, say, the Nazis' admiration of Wagner.

<sup>22</sup> An elaborated account of the concept of emergence would be needed here, but it is, fortunately, one of the key notions in Margolis's own position; so, I can refer the reader to his works (e.g., Margolis 1984). See also Pihlström (1999). Similarly, the relation between pragmatism and transcendental argumentation in general would deserve more discussion (cf. Pihlström 1998).

<sup>23</sup> I do not know whether Danto himself would approve of this suggestion, but I do not care. The pragmatist ontologist of art, to say it again, is free to use Danto's (or anyone's) ideas for her or his own purposes. If they turn out to be useful in a pragmatist account, that is to their merit.

<sup>24</sup> Parts of this paper were presented at the international AWE Symposium – Artist, Work of Art, and Experience – in Helsinki, on June 14, 2000. I am grateful to all participants for comments and criticism, and especially to the organizers of the meeting, Pentti Määttänen and Heidi Westerlund.

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