

## *The Fate of the Arts*

---

Today the arts—both high and popular—are as ubiquitous as ever. Interestingly, just as ubiquitous is a confusion about the nature and meaning of art. There is a long history that has led to this moment.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were those who looked to the arts with the highest expectations, regarding them as a source of deep personal meaning and public cohesion. From Romanticism to humanistic Marxism, the hope was held that the arts would reflect the highest ideals of humanity in such a way that they would be, in effect, an alternative expression of transcendence in a secular society.

Yet by the end of the twentieth century, it was clear that the arts had failed to achieve this promise. Today, not only have much of the arts turned in on themselves in a tangle of subjectivity, leaving many unsure just what the arts are, but they have also been too easily co-opted by the powerful and transforming institutions of technology, the market, and politics. What the critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno noted about the “culture industry”—its tendencies to create a uniform and coarsened mass culture that undermines cultural difference and silences dissent—seems truer today than in 1947 when their observations were first published. These factors and others led some to speak, perhaps prematurely, of “the corruption of the humanities,” “the death of literature,” “the end of art,” and so on.

Whereas the Romantics found hope in the transcendental power of poetry, and the Modernist avant-garde saw in the arts the potential for political change, many people in contemporary society see the arts as esoteric, distant, and irrelevant. The drive among artists to differentiate the arts from the prevailing institutional powers of modern life has led them to employ increasingly refined and difficult meanings that their audiences have grown weary of trying to follow. Such tactics have failed to preserve a clear purpose for the arts amidst the various forms of modern institutional power.

The fate of the visual arts provides an excellent example. Corporations now not only fund, but also have a strong influence over, whole wings of some of the country’s leading museums. New digital technologies have made it easier for marketing firms to appropriate the images of classical art. Government-funded arts programs are repeatedly subjected to partisan politics and find their budgets being cut or restored as new officials reverse the decisions of their predecessors. These and other developments reveal a society deeply divided over the importance of the arts to education, citizenship, and a vital, energetic democracy.

At this critical juncture, when the ability to envision the arts as integral and meaningful to our society is all but lost, this issue of *The Hedgehog Review* brings together essays by leading thinkers and practitioners to consider the contemporary place and potential of the arts. The essays range in tone from the philosophical to the poetic, from the abstract to the practical. Some take on the question of the arts in general; others focus on a particular form of the arts. Some discuss the role of the artist; others focus on the reception of the arts; and still others address the public perceptions of, and policies concerning, the arts. What they share, however, is a sense that the arts constitute a vital aspect of human society—one that merits more sustained attention than we are currently paying it.

The following list suggests the range of questions that these essays explore: What are the cultural conditions that have brought us to this point? In what way have the arts lost their ability to hold sway over the public imagination, and what does this say about the society we live in? What kind of influence can the arts exert within a society dominated by the forces of the free market, information technologies, and political power? What alternative structures, communities, and institutions are needed for the arts to play an integral part in the renewal of humane ideals and practices in our public life?

In a time when the use and usefulness of the arts are contested more than ever, it is vitally important that we grapple with the challenges facing these forms of imaginative expression that have long been near the heart of human society and consider their possible futures.

—T.H.R.