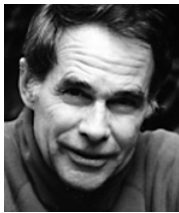


The Role of Artists in Post-Contact Self-Identity

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Artists have always played a vital role in shaping our cultural identities. This role is not merely cognitive, for the arts do far more than instruct or interpret. At their most meaningful level, the arts provide powerful life experiences that are a rich amalgam of perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and perhaps spiritual or psychic aspects of human consciousness. The arts have always (in Western societies, at least) served the purpose of heightening awareness of our mythic self-identity, helping both to illustrate and to create an awareness of shared human values. Perhaps in this regard the arts share some purpose with religion. Unlike religion, however, the arts have never quarreled with science. And at least during the 20th century, the arts have shared with the sciences the intellectual adventure of exploring the new and unknown.

I make this introduction because I feel sure that from the moment of first contact with an ETI (barring total social disintegration or worse), artists will embrace the experience of contact and explore the relevance of that initial contact and its long-term content to our collective self-identity. Indeed, artists may prove more resilient to the impact of initial contact with an ETI than members of some other professions who are locked into more rigid identities.

The questions of what art is, and what subject matters and techniques are appropriate for art, are fundamental to 20th century aesthetics and have a bearing on post-contact art. What new forms of

expression may arise to meet the challenge of seeing ourselves as part of a cosmic citizenry? Is there an ET art and are we capable of identifying it as such and appreciating it? Are artistic collaborations with extraterrestrials possible? Is there a cosmological aesthetic? (It may seem so since there appears to be a qualitatively unique aesthetic appreciation shared by all human beings that is fundamental both to art and to scientific intuition. If extraterrestrials are technological beings, they may experience some form of similar aesthetic appreciation.) Might artists be more capable of recognizing ET art than other members of our society? These questions, of course, presuppose certain conditions: that communication is possible and that extraterrestrials desire to communicate.

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Contact, however, may not occur exclusively through such technological prostheses as radio or optical telescopes. It is at least conceivable that contact may also be transmitted directly through the minds of humans. Indeed, contact may be occurring now. Perhaps the phenomenon of UFOs, if it represents an alien intelligence, is some form of extraterrestrial art project involving the human species (or perhaps a sort of koan leading the public to gradual enlightenment about alien existence). Whether UFOs are alien or not, it seems safe to say that for humans the range of artistic experience—encompassing as it does today such forms as Happenings, Installations, Performance Art, and site-specific “Earth Art,” all unimagined a century ago—will be expanded further as a result of contact with extraterrestrial intelligence.

As an artist, I find exciting the possibility of humans deriving inspiration from alien art forms, or of some form of human/alien collaboration in the arts. Collaborative efforts in the arts may precede

such efforts in the sciences or other intellectual disciplines. While we may not initially have the wisdom, knowledge, or technology to share ventures in the sciences or economic spheres, we have a storehouse of species-specific myths and aesthetic/emotional capacities that may be unique to our evolutionary development on this planet and hence of great value to an extraterrestrial audience. I take heart that we in 21st century Western societies can have so much

appreciation of the “primitive” art forms of indigenous peoples and in the fact that an understanding of the cultural content of such art actually augments its expressive power for us. The basic value of art seems to lie beyond matters of technological prowess or sophisticated scientific understanding. An extraterrestrial culture that may initially find us scientifically unimportant may also find in our human spirit unique opportunities for interspecies involvement.