

**The Artist and the New Humanism:
an Evolutionary Model for Art History**
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Jeffrey Rubinoff's insights developed from the artistic process. They are rooted in his art—the many sculptural works on display in the Park—and convey a deep understanding of collective memory. He describes art as the “map of the human soul...As the artist navigates the unknown, [each original piece] adds to the collective memory”. Rubinoff contends that the artist whose work is consciously rooted in the history of art “possesses the chart” for the evolution of group consciousness. He argues that the artist of mature conscience, who maintains a dialogue with his or her predecessors and whose work synthesizes both metaphor and analogy, can incite evolution in a society that has become stagnant, as is often the case in periods of crisis. Rubinoff argues that Western society is now immersed in a long and deepening pattern of stagnation that was incited by the American use of nuclear bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945, thus bringing about the end of the period of human development that he has identified as the “Age of Agriculture”.¹

What follows is the full text of Rubinoff's insight on the need for Humanism in contemporary art, and his argument for a non-prescriptive narrative of art history that elevates art as essential to the evolution of consciousness:

The social relationships necessitated and maintained by the advent of agriculture have been a central component of structuring human society for over 10,000 years. Seriously considered, the concept of the End of the Age of Agriculture is highly consequential and requires a deeply thoughtful and thorough re-examination of the essential assumptions of our institutions and their evolutionary direction.

A philosophy based on our evidentiary knowledge of evolution and our consequential place in nature can provide a basis for the development of the order of consciousness necessary to overcome the virulent metaphorical forms of tribalism such as racism, nationalism and religion. Overcoming this socially atavistic, dangerous reliance is exigent given the advent of nuclear weapons.

¹ Jeffrey Rubinoff. These ideas are contained in his insight, “The End of the Age of Agriculture”.
<http://www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/coi.php>

Modern humans have evidently demonstrated a deep historical sense of awe manifested in perception of the sublime and the sacred.

Tribalism—metaphorically transformed and self-inflated by myths of monopolized divine favour—thrived through the Age of Agriculture by prescriptive narrative. Prescriptive narrative, so used, perpetuated the rule and continuous reward system of the warrior class. In spite of the Enlightenment in the West, this system remained extant through the terrible resurgence in the 20th century until it was finally and abruptly ended among technologically advanced nations by the deterrence of nuclear war.

Art provides a means to experience the sacred beyond prescriptive narrative. ...²

Rubinoff is particularly concerned with the state of the art world, arguing that mainstream artists and arts institutions have refused the calling to remain loyal to art history and expand human consciousness. Instead, the art world is loyal to the market. This shift occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when commercial galleries, leading museums and arts academics, canonized a group of young artists that included Andy Warhol (*Brillo Box*, 1964 and *Thirteen Most Wanted*, 1964), Robert Rauschenberg (*Trapeze*, 1964 and *Canyon*, 1959) and Roy Lichtenstein (*World's Fair Mural*, 1964). Rubinoff contends that this group, which later became known as the Pop artists, attached their loyalty to the art market and not to art history. This “supremely ironic gesture”, in his words, sent ripples through commercial galleries and public art museums, and had a tremendous impact on the arts education system. At the 2009 Inaugural Forum, I reported on the state of Pop art in 1964/5 and considered the enduring legacy of the New York World's Fair, where it was first exposed to a mass audience alongside the real and visionary products of the military industrial complex, both in person and through commentary in such periodicals as *Newsweek* magazine (*World's Fair postcards*, 1964).

At the New York World's Fair, artworks by Warhol, Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein joined the expository extravaganza that glorified the largely corporate victories of the atomic

² Rubinoff, “A New Humanism Beyond Prescriptive Narrative”. www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/coi.php

age (New York State Pavilion). At the time, several notable figures in the art world issued statements warning that Pop art actually contributed to this grossly hubristic display instead of challenging it, as many Pop artists and their supporters have argued. Nevertheless, the Pop artists' interpretations of their own work within this social context, and their stance of what Rubinoff calls "ironic absurdity," soon eclipsed all others. The World's Fair marked the ascendance of Postmodern theory the art world, which issued its own, strictly prescribed narrative for the history of art, the role of arts institutions and the potential of the artist. In ensuing decades, few canonical artists produced work that is rooted in art history or engages in or promotes the evolution of consciousness so that we might fully comprehend our new reality and the systems that govern it. Amidst this crisis, Rubinoff continues to challenge artists of mature consciousness to return to art history in order to produce works that promote and extend the process of evolution. If we are to comprehend the institutions that govern our world, humans must be aware of the matter and life forms that surround us, and our own potential to evolve within this context.

Rubinoff moved to Hornby Island to set up his one-man foundry and fabrication studio, and has laboured for three and a half decades to make his work accessible to the public in perpetuity through the establishment of the Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park. The Park is a space for the public to reconnect to art history, and its highest purposes of art through thoughtful contemplation of his sculptural works in concert with the landscape. Here the viewer's body and personal narrative take on many new elements.

Rubinoff's work prompts the visitor to contemplate his or her own position within the process of evolution, which includes the development of trees and mountains, individual conscience and human social systems. While his work is accessible to a diverse audience, he is particularly interested in reaching creative artists of mature conscience, with the understanding that they have the potential to evolve group consciousness. Through the Park foundation, Rubinoff has made a long-term commitment to encouraging and extending the work of artists and arts educators of mature conscience.

Rubinoff's practice is rooted in an awareness of the evolutionary potential of art, which he imparts on visitors to the Park. He described the importance of this history of art:

Art is the map of the human soul; each original piece is proof of the journey. As the artist navigates the unknown, the art adds to the collective memory.

The artist's journey on the path of art history takes him to the farthest reaches of his predecessor as his point of departures. The artist who follows that history then possesses the chart for evolution, which he is in his turn is obliged to extend to his successors.³

As an art historian who shares many of his concerns over the present state of the art world, I, too, am interested in encouraging and promoting the work of artists who have the potential to evolve consciousness. For these reasons, today I will be exploring the means through which Rubinoff promotes evolution in his work. I will begin by considering how evolution imbues his creative process.

Rubinoff has cultivated a non-prescriptive, non-academic narrative of art history that, I agree, could be invaluable to other artists of mature conscience. I will expand Rubinoff's reference base by reviving the work of post-war philosopher Herbert Read, who, recognizing the crucial need for the expansion of human mental existence, promoted a remarkably similar model for art history in the 1950s. It is our hope that this evolutionary model for art history will bolster the practice of artists of mature conscience who will in turn initiate a sea change in arts academia

Rubinoff considers music to be "sculpture in elastic space", and transposes the concept of Counterpoint to sculpture, which is "music in plastic space". His works are unified through the harmonic interplay of positive and negative forces (*Series 4, Number 3* and *Series 5, Number 5*) that extend to the natural environment (*Aerial 3, Aerial 12* and *Mountain View*). Because Counterpoint is by nature non-prescriptive, artworks that are composed in

³ Jeffrey Rubinoff, "The Importance of the History of Art." <http://www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/coi.php>

accordance with its principles can play an important role in the evolution of consciousness.

Rubinoff utilizes Counterpoint as a means of approaching the sacred through art, and argues that the perceptive experience fills a fundamental spiritual need that Pop art failed even to acknowledge. In his insight on the End of the Age of Agriculture, he identified the most powerful institutions of that Age--tribalism, religion, nationalism and racism—as being perpetuated through prescriptive narratives. Once it was taken to the “nuclear extreme”, he argues, the logic governing the institutions of the Age of Agriculture became self-undermining.⁴

Rubinoff is a strong advocate for a new Humanism to promote the evolution of consciousness at the present. As I will explain, there is a thread of scholarship from the Ancient world that acknowledges the artist as uniquely situated to approach the sacred and promote the evolution of consciousness. Likewise, there is a long tradition of artists who have recognized and responded to the human need for the expansion of consciousness.

Some theories on evolution, a selection of which will be discussed here, focus on periods of crisis and change in human history, pinpointing the adaptive creative models—including 2-D and plastic visual art, craft, narrative and dramatic stories, music, theatrical performance, dance and other forms—through which abstract ideas could be contemplated. I will draw from sources that elevate both the human creative process and the aesthetic experience as fundamental to evolving consciousness. This evolutionary model for art history is inherently Humanist.

Working outside the conventional training grounds for young artists seeking fame and the favour of the market in the age of Pop, Rubinoff carefully cultivated a dialogue with his

⁴ Ibid, “The End of the Age of Agriculture”. <http://www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/coi.php>

artistic predecessors, including painters Michelangelo (*The Florence Pietà*, c.1550) and Wassily Kandinsky (*Composition VIII*, 1923), fellow sculptor David Smith (*Cubi X*, 1963 and *History of LeRoy Borton*, 1956) and composers Johann Sebastian Bach (*The Six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello*, 1717-1723) and Arnold Schoenberg (*Serenade, Op.24*, 1920-23), artists whom he considers to be of mature conscience. Rubinoff forged his own non-prescriptive narrative by pursuing examples of artists whose work responded to a deep evolutionary instinct to evolve consciousness in their own time.

Post-war scientific and design culture promoted a dystopian view of the future by promoting either man's destructive potential or the irreversibility of his recent actions. The prescribed narrative of this unresolved chapter of our recent history has marginalized and largely silenced the not insignificant number of artists and scholars who insist that the human and human consciousness should be centered in the effort to understand the present. Herbert Read was among these scholars, and in the 1950s he argued passionately that human consciousness undoubtedly can evolve or expand after a period of great trauma. He demonstrated that humans have repeatedly survived trauma throughout history and that our evolved consciousness allows us to forge a new reality.

The key to evolution of consciousness, according to Read, is that the image preceded the idea. In other words, the artist forged a new reality and human consciousness evolved in the process of comprehending the abstracted reality presented in visual (or another) art form. In the 1950s, Read promoted a new narrative of art history that tracks the evolution of consciousness. This inherently vital, Humanist project provided assurance that humans could adapt to their new reality and that the process would be enabled by a greater understanding of art and its role in the evolution of consciousness.

In 1953, Read gave the Norton Lectures at Harvard University, at which he presented a series of talks on the function of art in the development of human consciousness. He acknowledged that he did not originate the idea. Rather, it is latent in the "neglected" works of several writers, including Fiedler and Cassirer. The latter claimed that the human

“spirit” (we might exchange that word for “consciousness”) creates symbolic form through art, myth, religion and cognition, and that each of these constitutes its own reality.⁵ By his own description, Read extended Cassirer’s argument as it relates specifically to the symbols of art, and placed them in a historical context.

Fielder wrote that “Artistic activity begins when man finds himself face-to-face with the visible world as with something immensely enigmatical...In the creation of a work of art, man engages in a struggle with nature not for his physical but for his mental existence”.⁶ He suggested that man is forced “by his very nature” to attempt to bring the visible world into his consciousness through the process of making art. This activity is essential to the human mind, he argued. Otherwise it will cripple itself.⁷ This basic conception was dominant in German philosophy, poetry and other arts in the modern era.

While Cassirer and Fielder wrote on the creative process in general and largely individual terms, Read crystallized their ideas with those of evolutionary biology to understand the development of human consciousness in the broadest sense. He argued that the image “always precedes the idea in the development of human consciousness,” and thus our history of culture and art, our philosophies and educational systems, should be reconsidered in this context.⁸ In another publication, he extended this proposal to the wider community, describing not just the creative process but aesthetic experience as an “essential factor” in human evolution, on which “*Homo sapiens* has depended for the development of his highest cognitive faculties.”⁹ Read proposed only a foundational outline for what he acknowledged would be an immense project.

It is worthwhile for us to reconsider his proposal, because on the one hand his central idea

⁵ Read, p. 5.

⁶ Conrad Fielder, *On Judging Works of Visual Art*, transl. Henry Schaefer-Simmern and Fulmer Mood. Berkeley: University of California Press (1949), p. 48. Originally composed in 1876. Quoted by Read on p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.* Fielder, pp. 43-4. Quoted by Read on p. 17.

⁸ Read, p. 5.

⁹ Read, “Art and the Evolution of Consciousness,” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Dec. 1954), p. 143.

intersects at many points with those of Rubinoff, who contends that our institutions, including schools of arts education, must evolve and that new ones must be innovated to assist human beings in adapting to our current reality. Devising a new narrative of art history that considers the image as a precedent for the idea and the idea as essential to the evolution of human consciousness acknowledges the potential of art as a permanent form and seeks to understand its links to other works and the context in which they were created.

Read's project relates to this Forum and the mission of the JRSP in several ways. I will highlight some of the art works he selected as exemplary of the role of art in the development of human consciousness and summarize his description of their significance and reasons for including them in his survey. It is important to note that his survey is a marked departure from the story of art history that has dominated for two centuries and to a large extent dictates the structures of arts education and artistic practice in the present day. Mainstream art history charts the history of art through the progression of style and concept. This notion of art and its development was produced in the Western tradition. Despite attempts to correct its many oversights and to de-emphasize the course of stylistic development, particularly in consideration of the many other art traditions around the world, this conception of art history dominates at the present. Michel Foucault would suggest that Art History produced its own disciplinary frame, and thus it cannot envision an approach beyond it.

Read's model is a significant departure from conventional surveys of art. He argued that there has been no significant expansion of technical ability from the time of the cave painters (Ox and Horses Mural, Lascaux, ca. 15,000 BCE) to Michelangelo (Sistine Chapel ceiling, 1508-12) or later artists. He demonstrated that the area of real expansion has been in aesthetic awareness, and that our evolutionary Art History should take it into account. His project was to demonstrate in historical terms that the arts enabled man, "step-by-step to comprehend the nature of things. Art has never been an attempt to grasp reality as a whole," he confirmed, for that is "beyond our human capacity". Likewise it was never an

attempt to represent the “totality of appearances”. Rather, he argued:

...it has been the piecemeal recognition and patient fixation of what is significant in human experience. The artistic activity might therefore be described as a crystallization, from the amorphous realm of feeling of forms that are significant or symbolic. On the basis of this activity a “symbolic discourse” becomes possible, and religion, philosophy, and science follow as consequent modes of thought....It gives to art the first place and primary function in the evolution of all those higher faculties that constitute human culture.¹⁰

Read’s survey of art describes what he called the decisive stages in man’s aesthetic apprehension of reality, beginning in the Prehistoric era. As he argued, this analysis demonstrates how the human mind successively “conquest[ed]” the “definite modalities of existence”. These seven stages are: the animal, the human, the intellectual, the numinous, the transcendental, the real and the super-real.”¹¹

In Stage I, Read considered the genesis of the “specifically human” consciousness defined as not yet being logical or aware of causality, but having some awareness of synchronicity. He argued that humans first developed a sign that confirmed a sense of synchronicity, that is, two events happening at the same time in different places. This sign could be separated from the immediate circumstances and stored in memory.¹² Thus, the individual could conceive a certain goal, such as a killed animal or stores of berries, and take the necessary action to procure it. He cited the finger drawings at Pech-Merle (Dappled Horses, ca. 25,000 BCE) and Lascaux (Frieze of animals and detail of Heads of oxen, ca. 15,000 BCE) in France as early examples of recognizable symbols emerging in visual forms used to accomplish specific goals.

¹⁰ Read, *Icon and Idea*, p. 18. It’s important to note that Read cite as influential the work of Henri Bergson, which he called “the only metaphysics that is based on biological science”. Read borrows his definitions of the terms consciousness and intuition. He also credits the work of R.G. Collingwood, who argued in the 1930s that art is an expression that is essential to the human mind. Collingwood emphasized that art is not just reserved for poets.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 21.

The symbol, or objective image, he explained, served as an enlargement of experience. The experience of hunting and preparing to hunt could be repeated on the one hand, and two or more experiences could be combined simultaneously and unconsciously. Over time, as consciousness increased, the distance between symbols and experiences decreased through familiarity. Most importantly, they could be compared. In this early stage, memory became a vital function. Read defined it as:

...the means by which the child, and primitive man, and, we can assume, prehistoric man, builds up a rational conception of its environment, and by recognition of this memorized and realized conception of its environment, is able to establish the rudiments of cognition.¹³

The development and aesthetic recognition of symbolic forms was integral to the expansion of consciousness at this stage. Previously, Paleolithic humans developed and improved their hunting skills, of course. But, as Read suggested, such skills do not necessitate a high level of cognition, for even the spider and wolf have reflexive hunting techniques. Humans later developed intellectual faculties because in this earlier evolutionary stage they projected and compared images and then dedicated them to memory.¹⁴

On this point we must acknowledge the Structuralist tendencies underlying Read's project. In general, he attributed differences in style and subject matter to the specificity of the local climate. He considered the flourishing of cave paintings in the Levant and Eastern Spain (Flight of Archers from a cave near Morella la Vella, ca. 8,000 BCE and Frieze of Animals from Cueva Vieja, Alpera, ca. 8,000 BCE), where, instead of the isolated beasts that are characteristic of Lascaux, images of the herd and the hunt are dominant. The Bushman paintings of South Africa also features tiny human figures swarming large game (Male koodoo from Nswatugi cave, Whitewaters, Southern Tanzania). Read called upon the theories of Alois Riegl to explain the depiction of the human figures in these examples.

¹³ Read, "Art and the Evolution of Consciousness," p. 150.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 150.

Riegl outlined a theory to describe art forms that are dictated by inner sensation instead of outward observation. In the Levantine and South African paintings, the limbs are often stretched because, Riegl suggested, they feel long.

Hence, in the earliest stages of art making and aesthetic experience Read observed two different pursuits. The first is an outward realization of the image, and the second is the inward sensation. Read suggested that these styles coexisted and that the same artists could work in either form. He drew on existing scholarship on prehistoric man and evolution to develop the theory that these images were created as a response to biological stress.¹⁵

Read identified the transition from Paleolithic to Neolithic culture, in which groups of humans ceased to be nomadic and developed settlements sustained by agriculture and domesticated animals, as Stage 2. He analyzed Neolithic aesthetic productions in several forms, including geometric pottery decoration, ceremonial spears and other tools as well as astronomical calculations.¹⁶ Among the works he cited as exemplary of the Neolithic period are Tlingit basketry (Tlingit polychrome carrying basket with five design bands and Tlingit bowl with cover) and Egyptian pottery (Reid's diagram on geometric designs in Amratian Culture pottery, ca. 5,000-4,000 BCE).

Read analyzed hundreds of works produced in many cultures and determined that most are characterized by formal composition. The finished artwork, he wrote, is not an imitation of a given prototype, but it is the "isolation of form from its practical function and the transference of this disembodied form to quite a different context". The image is not, as he wrote, "retained in all its actuality." Rather, it is transformed.¹⁷

In basket making and pottery, Read discerned an awareness of pattern and volume. Producing pattern in weaving, as he wrote, involves the creation of geometrical patterns by

¹⁵ Read found no evidence that Paleolithic artists consciously abstracted from nature.

¹⁶ As he noted, Reid accepted the general assumption that spiritual religion developed in this period.

¹⁷ Read, p. 39.

the manipulative action of the hands and fingers. Pottery involves shaping a plastic material into volume.¹⁸ Read acknowledged that the ability to comprehend abstract imagery evolved through abstraction from practical activities, thus endorsing Worringer's theory that art "represents the fulfillment of what is desired".¹⁹ Read also emphasized that, in addition to art, the human faculty to understand abstraction forms the foundation of logic, science and the scientific method, all of which developed in this period. He suggested that Neolithic art retains the "vital" force of the Paleolithic era, despite the fact that it seldom refers to knowable forms in the natural world. Neolithic works reflect the thought processes and decision-making processes enabled by abstraction, as well as a new range of human feelings that must have been associated with them.

Interestingly, although we may regard geometric patterning as unimaginative, even "primitive", Read suggested it is an unmistakably and vitally Humanist pursuit. He highlighted some of the abstract references to the organic world that appear in Neolithic design (Geometric krater from Rhodes, 9th to 8th century BCE and the page facing the opening of St. John's Gospel from *The Book of Durrow*, 8th century CE). The craftsmen could, for example, observe the effectiveness of symmetrical design in nature, in the bodies of mammals and even the human form. These new faculties of abstract thought eventually lead to the development of effective symmetrical tools such as the axe head.²⁰

Later Neolithic productions, such as the Great Lyre from the "King's Grave" at the Royal Tombs at Ur (ca. 2650-2550 BCE), often contained animal subject matter, presumably a reflection of the work related to the domestication of animals that characterized this period. The ability to tame animals, Read observed, was respected and frequently represented. The artist had to create works that showcased the tamer-magician's unmistakable power over the animal. Thus, the formal composition could be read as exhibiting the man's magical power (Gebel el Arak knife, ca. 3,5000-3,100 BCE).

¹⁸ Read, p. 40.

¹⁹ Read, p. 37.

²⁰ Read, p. 45.

Another expansion of human consciousness that Read located in this era was the ability to comprehend approximate symmetry in formal composition. That is, a composition in which the features are not mirrored from left to right, but instead are carefully arranged to achieve a sense of equal weight on both sides, and hence overall balance. This effect can be observed in: the Lamp lid of carved steatite from Tello, 24th century BCE; a carved limestone plaque representing the King of Lagash, Ur-Nina, as a builder, ca. 2650-235-BCE; and, a relief from the Momnonium of Seti I and Relief showing Ashur-nasir-pal III of Assyria, ca. 883-859 BCE.

Read asserted that it requires an “aesthetic awareness of balance” to understand an asymmetrically balanced composition.²¹ The comprehension of visual unity and balance involves a synthetic mental process that, he argued, was a development of consciousness, a “leap forward in the apprehension of reality”.²² On this point Read extended his theory that the image preceded the idea, suggesting that the laws of geometrical composition were first made evident in art and hence “the first science was a notation of the discoveries of the artist; mathematics arose as a meditation on artifacts”.²³ He continued by arguing that the orderly perception developed by Neolithic humans was a biological evolutionary necessity; hence, the consciousness of beauty.

In summarizing the history of artistic development to this point, Read wrote:

...it is only in so far as the artist establishes symbols for the representation of reality that mind, as a structure of thought, can take shape. The artist establishes these symbols by becoming conscious of new aspects of reality, and by representing his consciousness of these new aspects of reality in plastic or poetic images.²⁴

²¹ Read, p. 49.

²² Ibid, p. 50.

²³ Ibid, p. 50.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 53.

The era of recorded history has largely been defined by religion and, according to Read, the states of human development that led to making a distinction between religion, magic and science. This transition necessitated the evolution of a conception of “invisible agents manipulating...objects [that have a spatial or sequential relationship] on some cosmic plan”. In this, the third stage, art developed the human intelligence necessary for metaphysical faculty.²⁵

Read pointed to the dematerialization of god figures in this period, and their representation in art as a spirit and power with real but unseen existence. He argued that this awareness could only come about with a new appreciation of space as both an indefinite and infinite continuum. As he explained:

Before the gods could be conceived as invisible but conscious agents in human life, a space had to be conceived to which they could be relegated. The whole notion of transcendence...is conditioned step-by-step by the aesthetic awareness of space...²⁶

Among the earliest surviving works that seem to reference an aesthetic awareness of space is a painting of two adult figures mourning a dead child that is featured on a Lekythos from the second half of the 5th century BCE. Once space could be experienced as a “thing-in-itself, an immaterial emptiness of infinite extension,” Read observed, the human mind was open to the creation of transcendental religion in which the gods could be “relegated to heaven”. Likewise, this space could open onto the all-encompassing nothingness. These emotions, he wrote “on the brink of limitless space crystallized into the concept of the Absolute...the concept is read into the realized symbol...space was discovered in this process of ‘realization’; space became an entity of consciousness, a thing-in-itself.”²⁷

In this stage, artists endeavored to represent and materialize space. Read suggested that the

²⁵ Ibid, p. 54.

²⁶ Ibid, p . 59.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 64-5.

process was a “parallel evolution of perception and representation”. Transcendentalism was rooted in foundational religious myths including the Garden of Eden, where the deity was correlated to infinity. Physical manifestations of this ideal began with the basic dome and vault in Mesopotamian constructions (Eyvan-e Khosro at Ctesiphon, begun 540 CE) and Central Asian (Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 532-537 CE) and were perhaps most fully realized in the Gothic cathedral (Chartres Cathedral, 1194-1250 and Durham Cathedral, 1093-1133). In this stage, as Read described, the artist defined architectural space and the philosopher or theologian “fill[ed] it with god”.²⁸

The Greeks were likely the first to define and realize an objective image of man. Read described the fourth stage as being defined by the idea of Human as Ideal. As he suggested, it was inevitable that sooner or later man would need to comprehend and represent the “subjective source of all the images and symbols he creates in his attempt to construct an external reality—that he should...realize and represent the Self.”²⁹ This process enabled the structure of thought we call Humanism.

Read turned to Greek vase painting and sculpture to trace the expansion of consciousness from the expression of plastic harmony in the Neolithic period to the idealization of the human form in what is known as the Classical Age of Greece.³⁰ He described two distinctive developments that emerged in this period, his survey of which included the following: Cycladic figures, ca. 3200-2300 BCE; the Broomhall krater with a painting of the Cyclops, 7th century BCE; an Attic amphorae with a chariot scene, 6th century BCE; the Achilles and Ajax paintings by Exekias, 6th century BCE; Kleobix and Biton from Delphi, ca. 600-575 BCE; Apollo from Boeotia, ca. 540-510 BCE; and, the Peplos and Weavers scene from the Parthenon frieze, ca. 443-438 BCE. These developments are an instinctive expressionism and a growing idealism. The former is an externalization and the latter is an internalization of feeling. Expressionism, as he demonstrated, is a “containment of feeling

²⁸ Ibid, p. 71.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 74.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 74.

in harmonic form".³¹ In Greece, the human consciousness attained a new dimension that enabled the awareness of the perfect harmony of Being and Idea.

According to Read, as humans approached the so-called Modern Epoch, which encompasses the civilization of the West, it becomes difficult to differentiate between consciousness and the secondary pursuits of imagination and intellection. These points are key to our project to chart the evolution of consciousness and outline a non-prescriptive, Humanist history of art. Read's analysis of developments in the modern period, which spans of some six centuries, highlights the systems and institutions that intervened, to good and ill effect, in the expansion of aesthetic expression and perception. He called this fifth stage of evolution the "illusion of the Real".

It is possible that the quandary of post-war art and its seeming inability to assess and speak to a changed landscape, was actually the end point of a process that was set in motion hundreds of years earlier. If we are to understand, on the one hand, the failure of the art world to address the reality of nuclear winter in Humanist terms, then, Read would argue, we have to understand the preceding development of art and the points at which it departed, whether intentionally or not, from its role in evolving consciousness and perspective.

In the modern era, as Read described, the process of art proceeded on the basis of tropes and images that are not "directly derived from individual experience, but are so many counters acquired on the cultural exchange".³² In this period, schools and academies trained artists to accept established canons of expression that appealed to reason rather than the senses. Art students were subsequently discouraged from developing their own awareness of the visible world. Art became both a game and a science, he wrote, and the merging of the two produced confusion and frustration again and again.

³¹ Ibid, p. 76.

³² Ibid, p. 87.

One contradiction of this stage, one that remains in contemporary society, is that human consciousness was greatly extended as new dimensions of reality were discovered. In this era, Read contended, it became more difficult to argue that aesthetic activity preceded coherent intellectual activity because sensation, imagination, feeling and thinking were no longer separate and certainly not sequential processes.³³ Philosophy, he noted, has since the Renaissance pursued a scientific method as opposed to art, which has become increasingly ambiguous. Read drew a further distinction between the modern philosopher and artist by noting that the artist's efforts are an attempt to establish an individual "clarity of conscience"—a reality that the artist can perceive, and not a theory of reality or the nature of being.

Read suggests that consciousness was first corrupted in the modern era. At least as early as the 13th century, artists and others were pressured to deny their true feelings and perhaps even lay claim to other, external feelings. In this period individuals sought to deny or overcome innate feeling, and often turned away from the attempt after repeated failures. In reaction, they pursued other, undoubtedly less intimidating goals.³⁴ This analysis leads to Read's theory that a truthful consciousness is the "foundation of all genuine art". Bad, then, "is the unsuccessful attempt to become conscious of a given emotion...a consciousness which fails thus to grasp its own emotions is a corrupt or untruthful consciousness".³⁵ Read pointed to the typical late Medieval art object as a signal of untruthful consciousness (*The Annunciation*, alabaster carving, Nottingham, 15th century). As he wrote, so many carved sculptures and other objects of this era display a artificiality because the underlying symbol is...

...divorced from sensibility...merely a mannered manipulation of forms that had become clichés of design, a conventional ornament devoid of feeling...The artist...was content to give a deliberate illustration of intellectual concepts and religious dogmas that had never entered his consciousness as sensation or feelings, but were present to him as already received ideas,

³³ Ibid, p. 88.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 92.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 92.

as lifeless formulas. In such circumstances corruption of consciousness became endemic, and is only to be restored to a healthy state by the revolutionary impulse of one or more exceptional individuals.³⁶

Read's description of the corruption of consciousness and the importance of the artist as revolutionary figure have a bearing own on the contemporary art world and will be recalled later in this paper.

Also of interest to our consideration of the contemporary art world, Read emphasized that not all Medieval artists were working through false consciousness at this time, just that this process seemed to quickly dominate the realm of aesthetic production. As he noted, even in that period of widely corrupted consciousness, a few artists remained rooted in the evolutionary principles of vitality and beauty, and seem to have intentionally pursued a more organic aesthetic. These artists observed nature and natural phenomena, and gradually they transformed all types of art making and ornamentation in what emerged as a reaffirmation of Classical Humanism. (French 15th century tapestry; Giotto's Arena Chapel, including details of *Kiss of Judas* and *Lamentation of Christ*, completed 1350; and, Masaccio's *Tribute Money*, begun 1425). As Read asserted, this new effort of consciousness was required "if art was not to perish" amidst the plagues and wars and general "weariness of spirit" that characterized the late Gothic era.³⁷ His account of this revolution through the expansion of aesthetic forms gives us hope for a similar movement in our own time. Just as in the Renaissance, though, arts academies and institutions have a tendency to obscure such a precedent in the evolution and adaptation of art in the past. This is yet another reason why it is imperative to develop an evolutionary model for art history.

Proponents of socio-cultural art history, which dominates the teaching of the subject at the survey level, deny that any sort of evolutionary need would have been fulfilled through the

³⁶ Ibid, p. 93.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 93.

development and dissemination of Humanist subjects in art. These scholars argue that fully modeled human figures and the believable recession of space that typify Humanist-themed Renaissance works, functioned primarily as a tool of the newly wealthy merchant princes who exploited aesthetic creations to attack the philosophies and political systems supporting the feudal order and the Roman church (Botticelli, *Primavera*, 1482). While the conventional survey focuses exclusively on the plastic arts, as Read discovered, from time to time one “form of imagination” seems to have taken precedence over the others in the expansion of consciousness. In such cases, the ideas contained in one form of expression were often not translated to another medium for decades.

Read described how St. Francis evolved consciousness through poetry and oral tradition to which he introduced both freer rhythms and new subject matter to address ethical concepts like poverty and chastity. This evolution of consciousness occurred in poetry long before Giotto (*St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, 1295-1300) and Sassetta (*Ecstasy of St. Francis*, 1437-4), for example, realized these Humanist ideas in plastic form.³⁸ A true history of the evolution of consciousness, Read argued, would follow the arts in their separate courses to pinpoint when one form of imagination takes precedence over others, and for what reasons.

In the 15th century, in one example, Sassetta realized the transformative potential of the Legends of St. Francis in visual form at roughly the same time that a group of artists including Van Eyck (*Man in a Turban*, probably a self-portrait, 1433), Masaccio, and Witz (*Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1444) produced an aesthetic illustration of a new sense of empirical existence that was not linked to Franciscan thought. The latter group asserted that through self-creation, humans have substantial, empirical existence.

Read first pinpointed their affirmation of an imperishable objective world in the paintings of Duccio (*Maestà with Twenty Angels and Nineteen Saints*, c. 1255-60 and detail of *The*

³⁸ Ibid, p. 94.

Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew) and Giotto (*Arena Chapel* with detail of *Lamentation of Christ*), but, as he demonstrated, another century passed before this new consciousness of real existence was fully realized in the work of Masaccio (*Tribute Money*).³⁹ The artists who extended this idea provided an exact account of external reality, which is only possible in the absence of idealism and symbolic forms that might corrupt it. Giotto and Masaccio created a real, substantial presence for the human. The Paleolithic artist essentially did the same thing, as Read noted. The crucial difference was the real environment in which these early Renaissance artists situated human figures and the opportunities for them to interact with others in the same spatial continuum.

Also pertinent to our discussion of contemporary art is Read's assertion that this process of realization was filled with conflict. The fact that Masaccio succeeded in rendering his consciousness of space and substance without resorting to clichés or denying his own sensation, is proof of his fitness as an artist of "good", or, mature, consciousness. Although Masaccio's artistic descendants extended his expressions of space and substance, Read noted another "fatal dissociation of sensibility" that occurred in art in the 16th century (Parmigianino, *Madonna of the Long Neck*, 1535 and Giulio Romano, *Fall of the Giants* mural from Palazzo del Te, 1525-1535). Out of the conceptual notion of "real" space arose an illusion of the real that artists were expected to achieve through established methods and conventions. As Read described the post-Renaissance period, it should be regarded as "one in which an infinite refinement of accepted symbols took place, and, as a parallel or consequent development, there was an infinite refinement of imagination and thought. But a time came when all that could be done had been done: refinement ended in sophistication, and little remained but repetition and return".⁴⁰

Read's survey of art repeatedly highlights the points at which one thread of consciousness expansion later became corrupted. At such junctures, including, perhaps, the present time, the student of evolutionary art history pursue another area in which consciousness

³⁹ Ibid, p. 95.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 106.

continues to expand. In his own practice, Rubinoff has located many such moments in the evolution of consciousness. Bach, for example, expanded consciousness through musical Counterpoint in the mid-18th century, but these concepts were not employed in the visual arts until the 20th century.

The sixth stage in the evolution of consciousness, as Read described, was marked by attempts to circumvent ideals and to present “not the illusion of the real but the reality of consciousness itself—subjective reality”.⁴¹ He traced this thread of expansion that began in the Renaissance, with the self-portraits of Leonardo DaVinci (*Self-Portrait*, 1512), Titian (*Self-Portrait*, after 1564) and Rembrandt (*Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, 1512), and was fully realized in the later work of El Greco (*Portrait of an Old Man*, 1595-1600) and Francisco Goya (*Self-Portrait*, 1795-1797). Read argued that Rembrandt was the first to probe below the “mask” of the cultivated persona to make visual an inner subjective state “irrespective to outward appearances.”⁴²

He also surveyed self-portraits produced by three modern artists. The first of these, Caspar David Friedrich’s (*Self-Portrait*, about 1835) according to Read, “projects...exceptional to a psychotic degree...the abnormal intensity of his ravaged mind”.⁴³ Friedrich, he suggested, was exacting in this expression, while Van Gogh’s self-presentation (*Self-Portrait*, January 1889) is “distorted”. From this point forward, as Read noted, self-portraiture was dominated by the “progressive disintegration of the outer or objective image and the substitution of symbolic forms that represent inner feelings”.

Tracing the expansion of the genre from Van Gogh onwards, Read observed a progressive disintegration of the outer or objective image and the substitution of “symbolic forms that represent inner feeling”.⁴⁴ Symbols were incorporated within the “mask” which was distorted until it became a mask of terror projecting the darker aspect of the human psyche

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 106.

⁴² Ibid, p. 115.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 116.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 116.

that is normally hidden away. He suggested that this development reached its limit in Paul Klee's *Self-Portrait* (1919), where,

...all objective record of the lineaments is lost, and the symbol of the self exists in self sufficient independence...The self, the artist is now telling us, has little...to do with the conventional mask I present to the world: it can be adequately represented only by signs or symbols which have a formal equivalence to an inner world of feeling, most of which is submerged below the level of consciousness.⁴⁵

Read's consideration of the pursuit of subject reality extends to the twentieth-century and includes the work of Sam Francis (*Green Oil*, 1953) and Jackson Pollock (*No. 5*, 1948). He suggested that through abstraction and seeming formlessness they were able to observe the self in isolation from other objects, and in the process to attain direct knowledge of the self, which is not engaged in the act of "willing something, or observing other objects".

Read identified the constructive image of the environment as the seventh and final stage in the evolution of consciousness, observing it in Romantic poetry and paintings. In this period, poets and artists promoted the concept that their work revealed a reality that already existed on some transcendental plane. They also purported to create a wholly new reality.⁴⁶ He discounted the work of Cezanne (*Mount St. Victoire* and *Les Grandes Baigneuses*, 1898) as the product of a corrupted consciousness because the artist utilized conceptual modes of cognition in the perceptual process of art. These tools, Read argued, "destroy the aesthetic validity of representation. A sense of reality should never be confused with the science of optics".⁴⁷

Read characterized the first stage of Cubism, the Analytical (Braque, *The Portuguese*, 1911), as another corruption of consciousness, but the Synthetic phase (Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912) as a vital one, because its goal was to adapt the forms of nature

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 117.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 126.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 129.

to a “sensuously determined picture space of geometrical structure”. In works like Juan Gris’s *Composition No. 2* (1922), reality is no longer an external illusion to be visualized on canvas. Instead, as he described, the canvas was divided intuitively into forms of ideal reality “to which external objects must conform. It is a return to the ideals of the Neolithic artist” (Tlingit basket).⁴⁸

As Gris wrote:

It is not picture X which manages to correspond with my subject, but subject X which manages to correspond with my picture...The mathematics of picture-making lead me to the physics of representation.⁴⁹

Read suggested that abstract or geometrical art was the logical conclusion of this development. Gris’s experiment was extended by various artists including Piet Mondrian, whose painted work evolved “intuitively” from figural-ism (*Still Life*, 1910), to Synthetic Cubism (*Still Life*, 1910), to a non-figurative stage (*Composition C*, 1920). Mondrian espoused art that achieves a “true” reality instead of an illusion of reality:

Gradually I became aware that Cubism did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries; it was not developing abstraction towards its ultimate goad, the expression of pure reality. I felt this reality could only be expressed through pure plastics. In its essential expression, pure plastics is unconditioned by subjective feeling and conception...To create pure reality plastically, it is necessary to reduce natural forms to the constant elements of form, and natural color to primary colors.⁵⁰

Read summarized this expression of pure reality through abstraction as a process of

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 131.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 131.

⁵⁰ Piet Mondrian, from *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*. New York: Wittenborn, Schultz (1945), p. 10. Quoted by Read, p. 131.

dehumanization, meaning, the “liberation” of the human form from representation. This process, he argued, liberated human faculties from the “oppression of our personal, limited vision”. Mondrian envisioned a future in which art would point toward the reconstruction of the environment, for that was where expansion would occur in the nuclear age. As Read noted, this new vision of the environment was, and is, particularly necessary in the aftermath of the atomic bomb:

The future scale of the artist is not domestic, nor even monumental,
but environmental: the artist of the future will not be a painter or a sculptor
or an architect, but a new molder of plastic forms who will be painter and
sculptor and architect in one...

Mondrian promoted a new form and practice that, “...being purely constructive will aid the creation of an environment not merely utilitarian or rational but also pure and complete in its beauty”.⁵¹

Parallel to this notion, Rubinoff espouses a “new synthesis” achieved through the “dynamic engagement of truth with both analogy and metaphor”.⁵² He argues that artists must work with “one brain”, drawing from both the left and right lobes, to touch the sacred in art. When viewing works created by such an artist, the viewer of mature conscience can also access what Read called “that amorphous realm of feeling of forms that are significant or symbolic”. On the basis of this activity, “symbolic discourse” becomes possible, and through it humans can expand their awareness of the “nature of reality”.

To understand how Read’s model for an evolutionary art history is relevant to our situation, we must consider Rubinoff’s insight on Modernism and the New Synthesis. “A key concept in the new synthesis,” as he describes, “is the carryover that life opportunities are not divinely ordained but can be distributed equitably based on merit. And, that the

⁵¹ Piet Mondrian, from *Plastic Art*, pp. 62-3. Quoted by Read, p. 133.

⁵² Rubinoff, “Evolution of Mind”. <http://www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/modernism.php>

corresponding changes in social organization can be implemented. This is the means by which civilization itself can evolve".⁵³

As we advocate for a Humanist narrative of Art History, it is necessary to consider the current state of the art academy in general and to question why it does not seek or promote an evolutionary narrative. The academy is dominated by Postmodern thought, and while there are many theories of Postmodernism as it relates to the plastic arts, and many methods of pursuing these ideas in material form, the one constant is that Humanism is no longer possible. In general, Postmodern theory departs from the assumption that the Modernist enterprise was a colossal failure and that it destroyed itself in World War II. Postmodernism questions Modernist notions of progress, including the Humanist tradition. And, it promotes the idea that human life has floundered in the aftermath of Modernism's demise. Furthermore, Postmodernism contends that there are no universals, that all ideas and developments are relative. In general, it analyzes processes of thought and the processes by which social and visual norms are constructed. Thus, it situates art production within socio-historical reality.

Postmodern theory holds that art will not change human actions. Thus, there is no consideration of evolution of consciousness. Process and concept are emphasized over outcome and the values of the present deconstructed. Because Postmodernism promotes the rejection of aesthetic formalism, there is no discernable, shared style and rarely do we see schools of artists pursuing similar ends. If one were to describe the current scene in broad terms, Neo-Dada, and, in some cases, nihilistic Neo-Dada, might be the most accurate designation (Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988; Damian Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007; and, Fang Lijun, *30th Mary*, 2006 and *1998.11.15*, 1999). While there are many practicing artists who seek and elevate Humanist values in their work, their pursuits are typically not promoted as enthusiastically by the art establishment. As a result, many such artists work in relative isolation and their influence is generally not as broad.

⁵³ Rubinoff, "Modernism and the New Synthesis". <http://www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/modernism.php>

In addition to discussing the problem with postmodern theory as it relates to the teaching of art history, studio art and its impact on museum initiatives and public funding, we should also acknowledge the impact of the dominant theoretical approach to anthropology for the past half century. As Denis Dutton describes the general direction of opinion in the field, it has been,

...toward the denial of a human psychological nature other than what might have been constructed by local cultural conditions, along with a reluctance ever openly to discuss--- or to commit to print---comparisons between the values of peoples in modern industrial societies and those of inhabitants of tribal societies. Not knowing any better...many art theorists and historians have bought this anthropological bill of goods and have repudiated the search for artistic universals, or at best remained silently agnostic on the subject.⁵⁴

Dutton, who edits the widely influential web site *Arts and Letters Daily* and also writes for *The Guardian*, recently initiated a project to seek and promote a “pre-theoretical understanding” of what art is.⁵⁵ As he describes it, such an understanding would open us up to recognizing “broad intuitions about everyday experience, including cross-cultural and historical experience”.⁵⁶

All cultures have some notion of aesthetic judgment, and yet, as Dutton argues, Postmodern anthropological theory and art historical theory do not acknowledge it. For this reason, we have been hounded with the principle that we cannot compare Western and Non-western works of art. And yet, there are archetypal stories we all share and can recognize in art. We can appreciate the skill required to produce art, even if it is not a skill we see in practice in our own society. The assumption that there is no shared sense of judgment creates a greater sense of isolation and removes aesthetic taste from the realm of the natural.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 65.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 66.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 67.

If viewers rely only on the critical framework of Western modern art, Dutton continues, we are incapable of understanding aesthetic expression in other eras and by other cultures. Most art historians and anthropologists either focus on describing the formal qualities of the art object, or, increasingly, on discussing it purely in terms of the culture. This tendency, again, creates a sense of separation and isolation. As Dutton observed, the conviction that we can't understand "them" and they cannot understand "us" is self-fulfilling.

That Dutton is concerned with this phenomenon could be taken as a signal of increasing awareness that the criteria of the art world are flawed. He expressed the need to create a more general criteria which acknowledges the primary function of art as "intensify[ing] experience, enhanc[ing] it, extend[ing] it in time, and mak[ing] it coherent."⁵⁷

He argues that art criticism needs to be premised on an understanding of evolution, and not purely on abstract theory. His attempt at outlining a list of new criteria for art criticism unfortunately fell flat because he ignored the need for artists to remain loyal to art history. I mention his work, published just last year, not because his model itself will provide a way forward, but because I suspect he is representative of a growing number of art academics who recognize the significant lack in our current system.

A non-prescriptive art history that values human evolution is necessary at the present time because it stresses the potential of the image to impact others and thereby group consciousness. This is essential to the mission of the Park and to ongoing activities including this Forum. An evolutionary art history affirms that art is and has long been, key to human survival on the large scale.

Art, as Herbert Read wrote,

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 102.

..is still the activity by means of which our sensation is kept alert, our imagination kept vivid, our power of reasoning kept keen. The mind sinks into apathy unless it is...continuously stretching...The mind's growth is its expanding area of consciousness, and that are is made good, realized, and presented in enduring images, by a formative activity that is essentially aesthetic.⁵⁸

We rely on artists to promote the expansion of consciousness, and for this reason, the Park is dedicated to artists of mature conscience. As Read described the “good artist” of both the prehistoric era and the present is:

...of the same nature as a good hunter; that is to say, he would have been an individual whose particular sensational and cortical endowment made him exceptionally facile in that particular activity. In other words the prehistoric artist was not made but born.⁵⁹

We join Herbert Read in the search for what he called vital-ism in aesthetic expression, concurring that it is the best means for challenging the sense of nihilism that dominates the art world. As he wrote, “Modern nihilism in philosophy and art is the violent outcry of a disillusioned idealism”.⁶⁰ A non-prescriptive, evolutionary narrative for the history of art is not idealistic nor does it seek to be totalizing. It is a tool that empowers the artist to seek and cultivate new connections and interconnections in art history, to address and comprehend our current reality and the institutions that govern it, and most of all, to provide the image through which group consciousness is evolved. The proposition that the artist is obliged to art history and evolution before the academy and the market is essential.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Read, p. 30.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 35.

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