

**Introduction to the  
2012 Company of Ideas Forum**

*Art as a Source of Knowledge*

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## **Biography of Dr James Fox**

Dr James Fox is a Research Fellow in the History of Art at Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge University.

Before this, he held research positions at both Yale and Harvard. He works primarily on the impact of the First World War on visual culture, and is currently developing a monograph on the subject.

James also curates exhibitions and works with the British media, and he has just finished writing and presenting a major BBC series on 20th Century art that will be broadcast next month.

Thank you Karun, and thank you for having me again. It is pretty much exactly a year to the day since I was last on Hornby, and I am delighted to be back on this beautiful island again. As I look around I see many faces that I recognise from last year, and some new faces too. My hope is that everyone here – whether old or new – feels comfortable to say whatever they think to this Forum. This shouldn't be a case of academics talking, everyone else listening; it should involve all of us conversing. That way we can all have a stimulating, productive and enjoyable few days. It certainly seems that way from the programme that Karun has lined up: this year we have an impressive group of speakers delivering some very wide-ranging papers. My job is simply to get the ball rolling.

The subject of this year's Forum is 'Art as a Source of Knowledge'. It is an ambitious subject – even more ambitious than last year's – because humans have been debating that issue for almost as long as we have been debating. Certainly for as long as we have known what art is.

What is the value of art?

Is it a source of knowledge?

If so, what kind of knowledge?

These questions are old, they are important, and they are perhaps in the end unanswerable.<sup>1</sup> Yet this has not stopped people weighing in on the matter.

The first great contributor to the discussion was of course Plato. And Plato was unequivocal on the issue. Plato maintained that art offered us no knowledge of reality. Instead, it idly replicated the superficial appearance of reality. Art was therefore not much more than a mirror. All a mirror does, he claimed, is show us things we can already see.<sup>2</sup> However, a mirror shows us at least one thing that we cannot otherwise see: it shows us ourselves. And I believe that is where the value of art resides: in *self-*

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<sup>1</sup> See Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art*, Penguin, London, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, Penguin, London, 1987. For the 'divided line', see 510; for Plato's mirror analogy, see 596d.

knowledge; in self-consciousness. The best art helps to show us who we really are.<sup>3</sup>

It has always been the case. In fact, it goes back to what I consider to be the oldest surviving artwork. This object is, believe it or not, millions of years older than the cave paintings and the Venus figurines of the Paleolithic period. It is so old that it even antedates *homo sapiens* itself. Even more remarkably, we know the story behind it. Approximately 3 million years ago, a hominid was wandering through the scrubland of southern Africa. It stopped at a stream. Perhaps to drink. Perhaps, like Narcissus, to examine its reflection in the water. But then it noticed something. On the riverbed was a small reddish stone. It reached in, grabbed the stone, and carried it approximately 20 miles back to its cave. Three million years later, in 1925, that stone was found in that same cave near Johannesburg, next to the remains of what we assume was its finder. Now what was so special about that stone? Well, due to the vagaries of erosion, it had taken on the form of a face.<sup>4</sup> Its finder had neither made nor adjusted the object. It picked it up simply because in the stone's form, it recognised itself and its kind. For me, this story reveals that from the very beginning, images, symbolic objects, artworks – whatever you wish to call them – were inextricably bound to self-awareness, to self-consciousness, to self-knowledge.

Let us return to Plato. He refused to accept that art played a role in our intellectual development. Yet think about his generation. There were playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes; sculptors like Phidias, Myron and Polyclitus; and architectural projects like those at Delphi and the Acropolis. In fifth-century Athens, the arts were at the very heart of society and they were absolutely viewed as sources of knowledge. A perfect example of this is Homer. We now view *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as great works of literature. But to Plato's generation, they were much more: they gave historical, moral and theological instruction; they became the basis of formal as well as informal education; and they could even be described, as many scholars have done so, as

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<sup>3</sup> For an interesting discussion of this issue, see 'Works of Art and Mere Real Things', in Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: a philosophy of art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1981, pp. 1-32.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Bednarik, 'The "australopithecine" cobble from Makapansgat, South Africa', *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 53, 1998, pp. 4-8.

the Bible of the ancient Greeks. Plato knew this, and that I think is why he went on to banish most of the arts from his 'Republic': not because they failed to give his contemporaries knowledge but because they gave them too much – so much that they even rivalled his own school of philosophy.

Ancient Greece was not unique in this respect. Throughout the history of art and throughout the world, artists were called on to discover, to codify, and to pass on their era's most highly prized knowledge. This was why, in spite of a Biblical prohibition of 'graven images', Pope Gregory the Great advocated Christian artworks as 'Bibles for the illiterate'.<sup>5</sup> This was why, in the Italian Renaissance, artists could be philosophers, scientists, poets and noblemen, as well as being artists (it is therefore no surprise that in Raphael's *School of Athens*, Plato is played by Leonardo, and Aristotle by Michelangelo). This was why, in the great era of the Academies, 'history painting' was a crucial tool by which the values and ambitions of Europeans were shaped. And this is why, in the modern age, artistic expression became a virtual synonym for self-expression.

I could go on and on. Because in most societies at most times, art was not just one source of knowledge; it was one of the principal sources of knowledge. That is why it was so important to its contemporaries. However, I must now turn to our own era. When I asked Jeffrey a few months ago what he wanted me to discuss in this introduction, he used one word again and again: *engagement*. In some ways I think that word sums up the whole point of this Forum, the reason that we are all here today. Jeffrey believes that because art is such an invaluable source of knowledge, it is crucial that it continues to engage with the political, ethical and intellectual issues of its time. Jeffrey's own lifetime has presented unique challenges to that ambition, but he believes that those challenges have made that ambition more necessary than ever. I therefore wish to use the rest of this introduction to discuss Jeffrey's call for engagement in the arts within the context of his life and times.

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<sup>5</sup> See Celia Chazelle, 'Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate: Pope Gregory I's Letters to Serenus of Marseilles', *Word and Image*, IV, 1990, pp. 138-53.

Jeffrey Rubinoff was born in October 1945. What a time to have come into the world. A catastrophic global war had just ended; a potentially even more catastrophic Cold War was just beginning. The extent of the European genocides was still being revealed, and the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had barely stopped smoldering. The two years before Jeffrey's birth had probably been the most murderous years in history, and at the time many people believed that things were only going to get worse. In last year's paper, Jeffrey described himself as being 'born in the shadow of the Endgame'.<sup>6</sup> Yet for all the justifiable apocalypticism, this calamitous world seemed to offer art a new beginning. For if nothing else, those awful events forced artists to *engage*: to collaborate with the public institutions that surrounded them; to confront the fundamental issues of their time; and to do so for the good of the wider community.

Let me give you an example. In 1945 Britain was losing £14 million a day. Its national debt had climbed to 250 percent of GDP – almost five times what we have at the moment. Yet at precisely this time the government put significant amounts of money towards the foundation of the Arts Council.<sup>7</sup> Why? Because it knew that the beleaguered British population had never needed art more. The Arts Council's inaugural report stated the following:

'The visual arts are integral to a civilisation. Their quality and their success in expressing individual and social values shape the outlook of the whole community.'<sup>8</sup>

The Arts Council, I think, was correct, because the finest British art of the period consistently interrogated those individual and social values. Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* explored the human capacity for violence and hatred, and thus symbolised, according to Raymond Mortimer, the 'atrocious world

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Rubinoff, 'Through the Lens of the Endgame', (prepared for the 2011 Yale Forum on Art, War and Science in the C20th), May 2011: [www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/events/2011Rubinoff.pdf](http://www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/events/2011Rubinoff.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> The funding of The Arts Council commenced in 1945 with an annual grant of £175,000. For more, see John Pick, *The State and The Arts*, City University Centre for Arts, Eastbourne 1980, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *The Visual Arts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1946. p. 42.

into which we have survived'.<sup>9</sup> At the same time Graham Sutherland (a friend of Bacon's) approached the same subject, basing his figure of Christ on a propaganda book of photographs taken at the recently liberated concentration camps.<sup>10</sup> Yet Sutherland's painting, which was installed in the church of St Matthew's in Northampton, was designed to remind his viewers that even in the dark days of 1945, hope, faith and self-sacrifice could lead the British people forward. I cannot think of two more fundamental subjects than those addressed by these two pictures.

Across the continent, at exactly the same time, other artists were engaging with the era's political, ethical and existential questions. In 1944 Pablo Picasso, searching for concrete change, became an official member of the Communist party. Other artists, meanwhile, came to be identified with the period's leading philosophical tendencies. One of them was the sculptor Alberto Giacometti. In 1948 Jean-Paul Sartre, in an article entitled 'The Search for the Absolute', claimed that Giacometti's etiolated sculptures were the embodiment of existential man.<sup>11</sup> Giacometti admittedly refused the 'existentialist' moniker, but his figures – which are fragile, solitary and lost in the immensity of space – are both the charred victims of industrialised warfare and the survivors' struggles for a new life in its aftermath.

In the United States too, the late 1940s spawned an outburst of cultural production that confronted the existential dilemmas of a war-torn world. Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman believed their vast paintings could answer, or at least address, their age's biggest metaphysical questions; Mark Rothko used abstraction to search for the sacred in an otherwise seemingly godless world; and the sculptor David Smith – who had stumbled on a number of his signature techniques while assembling M7 tanks during the Second World War – used metal to explore the most fundamental sculptural idea of them all: the figure's relationship to space; man's dialogue with the natural world.<sup>12</sup> These are ideas

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Mortimer, 'Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion', *New Statesman and Nation*, 14 April 1945.

<sup>10</sup> *K-Z: Bildbericht aus fünf Konzentrationslager*, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces, 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'La recherche de l'absolut', in *Le Temps Moderne*, 3, no. 28, 1948, pp. 153-63.

<sup>12</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, *David Smith: Terminal Iron Works*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge MA, 1971, p. 60.

that continue to be worked out on this island in Jeffrey's sculpture park.

What point am I trying to make? Well, I am trying to argue that in the early part of Jeffrey Rubinoff's life, artists were busy *engaging*. Whether through abstraction or figuration, painting or sculpture, they were tailoring their work to the needs of the age, reflecting on the past, ruminating on the future, and above all interrogating – indeed asserting – a fragile but surviving humanism. This material will be addressed in greater depth (and no doubt with greater elegance) by Jeremy Kessler after our coffee break. So suffice it for me to say that in the 1940s and 1950s, the best artists were confronting the most serious and wide-ranging issues of their day; they were being rewarded for doing so; and they were doing so with what might even be called a public mandate.

But then something happened. Jeffrey Rubinoff has dated that 'something' to 1962, when he was seventeen years old. It was the year of the Cuban Missiles Crisis. The year of Andy Warhol's first one-man exhibition. But what was that 'something'? What actually changed? Rubinoff has described it as a shift in the tone of modern art from one of 'defiance' to one in which 'resignation' was 'stated as defiance'.<sup>13</sup> I'm not sure that I can be as precise as Jeffrey in dating and defining this cultural transformation, and I know that Jenni will be discussing 'resignation stated as defiance' later this afternoon. Broadly speaking, however, I am in agreement with Jeffrey: I think he is right to claim that at around this time there was a shift in the tone of modern art. That shift involved an abandonment of the high seriousness of the 1940s and 1950s; a loss of interest in the humanist themes that had preoccupied artists since the war; and above all, a *disengagement* with the wider world and its concerns.

So what brought about this change? What caused the disengagement that Jeffrey Rubinoff saw all around him when he decided to become an artist in the early 1960s? I think there are two principal factors.

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Rubinoff, 'Through the Lens of the Endgame', (prepared for the 2011 Yale Forum on Art, War and Science in the C20th), May 2011: [www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/events/2011Rubinoff.pdf](http://www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/events/2011Rubinoff.pdf)



The first, I believe, is social. The 1950s and 1960s are widely seen to have produced a new kind of society in the west. That society has been given various names: the ‘media society’, ‘the society of the spectacle’, the ‘post-industrial society’, and most memorably, ‘the consumer society’.<sup>14</sup> The development of this consumer age had a number of cultural consequences: first, it shifted priorities from the needs of the community (as had been necessary during the war) to the desires of the individual; second, with the rise of Pop Art consumer products replaced transcendental values as the focus of artists’ attentions; and third, the division between those products and the artworks that mythologised them was quickly and willfully erased, with the result that art itself was drawn into the same consumer constellation as everything else.

Art had nearly always been a commodity, of course, but never before had it been such a profitable one. The New York art market of the 1960s is now almost legendary, with dealers like Leo Castelli managing not only whole careers but entire artistic movements. And Castelli was not alone: the market expanded exponentially in the period. When Jeffrey was born, there were about seventy galleries of all types in New York City. By the time he was thirty that number had increased eight-fold to almost 560.<sup>15</sup> And of course, this growing market changed the nature of art. It was inevitable. The market encouraged art that was novel, entertaining, easily domesticated, and above all, easily sellable. Unsurprisingly, there was little demand for monumental paintings and sculptures that tackled forbidding existential issues.

The second reason for this change was rather more rarefied. It was in the 1960s that the modernist paradigm started to collapse and a new ‘postmodern’ era emerged. For some, postmodernism was little more than the artistic expression of the consumer age that I have already discussed.<sup>16</sup> However, it also made numerous intellectual interventions that profoundly undermined the avant-garde ambitions of engagement.

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<sup>14</sup> For a brief survey, see Madan Sarup, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1996, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> For more, see Joan Marter, ed., *Grove Encyclopedia of American Art*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, pp. 512-14.

<sup>16</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1991.

The first – and I realise that I am generalising hugely here – concerned meaning. A number of writers and philosophers from the 1960s onwards – Jacques Derrida being the most influential – argued that meaning itself was a moveable feast; a mirage in the desert; an unreliable ‘play of signs’ rather than a beautiful secret that was waiting to be discovered.<sup>17</sup>

This insight in many ways produced the second insight. If meaning was nothing more than a free play of associations – none more real than the others – then the artist and his or her ideas became virtually irrelevant. In 1968 Roland Barthes concluded that the artist (or author) was, quite simply, ‘dead’.<sup>18</sup>

The third insight was perhaps even more wide-ranging. Postmodern thinkers challenged many of the modernist values and narratives – all those Enlightenment universals like Reason, Progress, Truth, Morality and the liberation of the individual. These were all exposed by thinkers like Jean-Francois Lyotard as ‘idols’ and ‘metanarratives’ that had no basis in reality.<sup>19</sup>

So what did this mean for engagement in the arts? Well, if the artist was allegedly dead, if meaning could never be reliably communicated, if nothing in the end mattered, and nothing in the end could be changed, why bother even engaging at all?

And that might be another reason why, from the 1960s onwards, we can discern a very different tone in modern art: seriousness was replaced by silliness; purpose was replaced by play; optimism became irony; originality became pastiche; design was ditched in favour of chance; creation substituted for deconstruction. And perhaps above all, the old idea of an artwork as the finished product of a unique individual became old-hat. Instead,

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<sup>17</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Routledge, London, pp. 278-94

<sup>18</sup> ‘The Death of the Author’ (1968), in Roland Barthes, ‘ed. Stephen Heath, *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, pp. 142-8.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives’. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington & B. Massumi (French original, 1979), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, xxiv.

mass-production and collaborative performance became the most fashionable practices. The changes I am outlining may seem somewhat schematic, but before you interrogate me about them, I must confess they are not my own: many originate from Ihab Hassan's 1987 tabulation of the differences between modernism and postmodernism.<sup>20</sup>

In short, my belief is that these two factors – the increasingly organised commodification of the art world, and a general loss of interest in big ideas – has led the artists of Jeffrey's own generation away from the issues to which their predecessors were drawn.

And I must now say something very briefly from my own experience. I have spent a lot of time over the last decade in and around the London art world. Believe it or not, London still controls roughly 29 percent of the global art market.<sup>21</sup> And in that art world – in its fairs, and its galleries, and its events – I have seen very little evidence of what Jeffrey Rubinoff considers to be *engagement*. In fact, I have seen the opposite. The cold white spaces seem designed, if anything, to discomfort and exclude the public: only a V.I.P. population of the rich and famous is invited; the contents of these spaces are marshalled by a firewall of curators, gallerists and critics who seem determined to mystify rather than clarify; and more often than not the works themselves feel like the punch-lines to inside jokes of which you never heard the beginning. In short, the art world is now such a successful institution that it does not need the public anymore. And I'll go further: the art world is now so full of parties, celebrities, and sponsors that it doesn't even need art anymore.

Now I realise that I am being personal, and I certainly don't expect everyone here to agree with me. But it is these things that have drawn me to what Jeffrey Rubinoff is doing. Because as far as I see it, Jeffrey has bucked the prevailing practices of the art world in almost every way. He has withdrawn from the network of urban art galleries that showcase so much of today's art; he has made his work freely available to the visiting

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<sup>20</sup> Ihab Hassan, 'Towards a Concept of Postmodernism', in *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Arts Economics (for the British Art Market Federation), 'The British Art Market', [www.lapada.org/public/The\\_British\\_art\\_Market.pdf](http://www.lapada.org/public/The_British_art_Market.pdf) (accessed: 8 May 2012).

public rather than selling it to the highest bidder; and he has continued to produce what he feels is important rather than what a dealer tells him will sell.

But most important of all, events like this represent Jeffrey Rubinoff's ambition to make art *engage* again – in much the same way as it did earlier in the twentieth century, and in the centuries before that. Look around: you can see people from different parts of the world, from different generations, from different backgrounds: academics, students, artists, neighbours. And Jeffrey and Karun have brought all these people – all of us – together so we can talk as equals about issues that matter. What's more, this forum ensures that art is placed right at the centre of debates about who we were, what we are, and what we should do. I believe that is where it belongs.

But this, I should add, is only the first step. Jeffrey hopes that by re-legitimising 'art as a source of knowledge' and then mobilising that knowledge, the consequences could be far-reaching. He believes that what goes on here may in the long run inspire new artists, new audiences for art, and even alter the views of people who haven't previously considered art at all. Only time, as they say, will tell. But I think it is now time to hand over to the man himself. Thank you.