



The Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park

2012 Company of Ideas Forum on
Art as a Source of Knowledge

ABOUT THE 2012 FORUM

Jeffrey Rubinoff proposes that artists' inherited abilities for acute perception of spatial and temporal order are the same faculties evolved to bring down large prey. We 200,000 year old modern humans are the descendents of a 2.5 million year history as hunter gatherers. He argues that these genetic gifts for the perception of contrapuntal relationships in space and time are vital carry-overs to art from the age of hunting. Underscoring this point is the fact that the earliest surviving art predominantly depicts animals.

While some symbolic markings reminiscent of written language do accompany this early art, our biological capacity for speech supports the contention that the widespread use of language evolved orally. Indeed evidence of fully written languages only appears during the age of agriculture.¹ This may have been due to greater need for predictability in the administration of more complex societies demanded by the adoption of agriculture itself. What we can be certain of is that written language increases control of knowledge transmission through time and space.

For those of us socialized to think using written language, the notion of words and symbols having a prescribed meaning is inherent to the process of thought itself. Often those so habituated judge art to be a mysterious, subjective, and hence unreliable, source of knowledge at best.

Interestingly, Rubinoff inverts this into one of art's greatest strengths, arguing that "art provides a means to experience the sacred beyond prescriptive narrative." For art to be relevant to the measure of human values, it is desirable that its most sacred meanings not be prescribed by a social authority. Art thus offers a channel of perception and communication outside of the socially prescriptive institutions of the age of agriculture. Rubinoff's ambition for art is to impact upon individuals' conscience in their measurement of the values of human existence. He invites the assertion of these values as a necessary countervailing force to the existential threats posed by the products of advanced scientific inquiry, such as nuclear weapons and genetic engineering.

¹ Senner, Wayne M. "Theories and Myths on the Origins of Writing: a historical overview" in *The Origins of Writing*. University of Nebraska Press. 1989. pp. 2, 6 and 23.



Beyond contributing to an internal reflection on the values of human existence, art can also be a source of original perspective on the empirical realities that threaten existence itself. To recognize this, we must extend our consideration of art as a source of knowledge to include the artist's act of witnessing. Rubinoff describes art as "an act of will in accord with a mature conscience", which for him includes both the act of witnessing and recording:

Nature, by the passage of time and by the genetic sculpting of life has created a history that is crushingly honest and constantly probing the future. It is thus simultaneously innocent and guilty of the most destructive crimes that lead to the most magnificent creations. Without life there is no witness to this awesome and terrifying creative unfolding of the universe.

As far as we know, we fragile humans are the only fully cognizant witnesses. With this capability comes the great responsibility of this knowledge. This responsibility is a priori in those who are born artists. The act of will that I describe in my definition of art is the act of witnessing and recording this knowledge. This is the highest of human values—the recognition of the value of life itself. Therein resides the mature conscience. This is the essence of our being. Art is the map of the human soul.

For Rubinoff this act of witnessing has been articulated as historical insights, one of the most important of which is the End of the Age of Agriculture. However, such insights cannot be evaluated in the same manner as the largely interior experience of the work itself. Their value must be judged on the same terms as other evidentiary knowledge claims. If, after thorough examination, a few find them to be useful, they may articulate them further into full-fledged ideas. These complete ideas may in turn evolve knowledge.

The insights that evolved with and from Rubinoff's work are the themes addressed by an international group of scholars during the annual Company of Ideas Forums. Since the articulation of insights makes a double demand on the artist, the instances of artists with such ambitions are likely to be relatively rare. Jeffrey Rubinoff is one such artist.

— Karun Koernig, Curator



SPEAKERS & PRESENTATIONS

Dr. James Fox

Research Fellow, Art History, Cambridge University

Fox's introductory presentation discusses the importance of Rubinoff's call for the re-engagement of art in the face of its increasing commodification over the past 50 years.

Jeremy Kessler

PhD Candidate, Law and History, Yale University

Kessler situates Jeffrey Rubinoff's work, and the work of the Sculpture Park, in the context of cultural responses to the threat of nuclear annihilation, environmental disaster, and genocide, in the wake of World War II. Rubinoff has written that "Art is an act of will in accord with a mature conscience." In the post-WWII decades, as the nuclear disarmament, environmental, and human rights movements took shape, artists, intellectuals, and activists sought to develop new ways of conceiving of human integrity: when faced with the threat of extinction, humanity begins to look like a very transient phenomenon. Strikingly, calls for "maturity" and "conscience" were central to these attempts to discover a new humanism that overcame the moral relativisms of total war and its aftermath. Rubinoff's turn to Darwin, in particular, is a fascinating example of the re-fashioning of "maturity" and "conscience" required by the crisis of the post-WWII period. The need for such re-fashioning is still with us today.

Jenni Pace Presnell

PhD Candidate, Art History, University of British Columbia

Pace Presnell's paper starts by examining the concepts Grosz and Dix gleaned from art history to produce what Rubinoff calls statements of "defiance" in the face of total war. The first generation of artists to reach maturity after World War II, in the age defined by the threat of nuclear winter, soundly rejected Grosz and Dix. They turned instead to the aging DADA-ist Marcel Duchamp, and since the late 1950s, the prerogatives of the art world have largely been informed by his stance, which Rubinoff has described as "resignation stated

as defiance". While artists may claim their work subverts the authority of social norms or corporate culture, they are in fact resigned to the status quo to the point that they are indistinguishable from it. Pace Presnell's paper excavates the process by which Duchamp was rehabilitated by artists and institutions in the late 1950s and early 1960s, to understand how dissenting voices, including Rubinoff's, were largely erased from the canon.

David Lawless

Honours BSc in Ecology, Guelph University

Lawless addresses Rubinoff's argument that all humans share the narrative of natural history which binds us together far more than our apparent cultural differences. It examines how "survival of the fittest" might not be the current pejorative of "social Darwinism". Specifically, his research examines the evolutionary context of the Chauvet Cave, investigating the natural history of our human ancestors responsible for the paintings as well as the evolutionary origins of the fauna portrayed in the paintings. By integrating our evolutionary origins into our understanding of the Caves, Lawless addresses Rubinoff's argument that humans are bound far more by natural history than our cultural history.

Shahana Rajani

MA, Critical and Curatorial Studies, University of British Columbia

Rajani discusses the integration of Rubinoff's sculpture with the landscape of the sculpture park and its environment. She contrasts this to conventional strategies of display, which disassociate art from the outside world. She argues this has contributed to a view of art as a 'transportable and exchangeable commodity'.

Jeffrey Rubinoff

Sculptor, Founder of the JRSP

Rubinoff will present the argument for the re-engagement of art at the centre of the challenges to human existence.



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