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# Art Is Like Cancer

By Stewart Home

Stewart Home is already well known to many for his anti-art antics, but his early inspiration and fellow iconoclast, Roger Taylor, is rather less familiar. The recent publication of Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art*, which rehearses Taylor's account of the historical novelty and specificity of art some 30 years later, seemed like a good excuse to meet up. In an era when art is increasingly promoted as accessible and desirable for everyone, Taylor explains why art remains 'an enemy of the people'

Larry Shiner in his recent tome *The Invention of Art* argues that art is an invention of 18th century European society. When I saw this it immediately reminded me of similar anti-essentialist arguments in a much older book, *Art an Enemy of the People* by Roger Taylor, which when I encountered it back in the '80s was a joy to read. Taylor was the first writer I'd come across whose arguments about art didn't exude the rotten egg smell of the idea of God. Frankfurt School rhetoric about the negative and critical function of art was obviously bourgeois idealism dressed in Marxist rags. Likewise, even Situationist slogans about the realisation and suppression of art were self-evidently idealist slippages that failed to advance on Young Hegelian positions of the 1840s. Indeed, given that the Situationists theorised revolution as poetry, it sometimes seemed they were reversing backwards into Hegel's system; since within Absolute Mind romantic poetry is the highest category of art. Rather than advancing from philosophy to the deed, the notion of realising and suppressing art seemed to me more like dialectical atavism. Roger Taylor on art seemed a lot more coherent than Guy Debord. Taylor held to an anti-essentialist stance that insisted the only thing all art works have in common is that they are treated as works of art.

That said, focusing on art as an ideology rather than a random collection of objects, it appears to be concerned with the sensual; and this mirrors the way science serves capitalism as a representation of the rational. This art/science or sensual/rational divide is clearly dehumanised and alienated. One purpose of revolutionary activity is to reconcile the sensual and the rational. In much discourse about art, artists come across as an abstract representation of what it should be like to be human. But being human ought not to be the preserve of artists; we should all be collectively realising the many different emotional, physical and intellectual aspects of our species being. So how are we to live out all these contradictions? Just like capitalism, of which it is both part and microcosm, the art world isn't about to fade away of its own accord. Indeed, the end of art itself seems to go on and on in the form of neo and retro avant-gardes. The avant-garde emerges partly from religious iconoclastic traditions, and as a consequence it doesn't even know how to live out the death of art in silence; instead it gets dumber by the day as do its neo-critical productions. The baby is thrown out with the bath water, since in its desire to appear critical the avant-garde and its progeny abandon the sensuous without even attaining rationality. Personally, I feel no shame about working in the culture industry, since I know that however I support myself in a capitalist world I'm going to reproduce my own alienation. Nevertheless, self-consciously living out such contradictions and shocking the bourgeoisie with heretical critiques of something that provides me with a living is not without risks; these include but are not limited to inadvertently acquiring refined tastes.

I wondered what Roger Taylor would say about these matters. Did he think Larry Shiner's position was similar to his own? Taylor's first book had been published at the tail end of the '70s and the follow up, *Beyond Art*, is now more than 20 years old. We've been in contact for many years but have never really talked about 'aesthetics'. I knew that recently Roger had been returning to philosophy and some fruits of this labour have appeared on his website. Clearly, he remains as hostile to art as the title of his first book suggests. Taylor recommends Shiner's book but thinks it sides with the enemy. He wants nothing to do with art and instead aims to stimulate debate about what he calls virtuality. Taylor

is looking for things of immediate benefit to the working class, not to the proletariat as the historical agent that will realise our species being. I like the way Roger talks and this should be evident from the following interview; although I disagree with him about what is and is not of value in Marx.

SH: Recently Larry Shiner's book *The Invention of Art* has been receiving some attention and his position seems similar to your views in *Art an Enemy of the People*. What is your opinion of Shiner's book?

RT: There are parallels. The book is impressive and should be read. It first appeared in 2001, 23 years after the publication of my own book. Larry Shiner tells us that in advancing his thesis about the invention of art academia has treated him as an irritating pest, as though he was reminding them of something they would prefer not to discuss, something that should remain buried. Perhaps this explains why his book has only just seen the light of day. Shiner is even older than myself. Still, in the spirit of anti-ageism, we are trying to stir things up, trying to ventilate a post-modernist, obscurantist smog. What is very good about *The Invention of Art* is just how clear, comprehensive and empirical it is. Shiner holds a chair in philosophy at the University of Illinois. His book though is more history of ideas than philosophy. He makes allowances for the general reader but still provides a convincing scholarly base, which is something missing from my more philosophical account. I particularly liked his redirection of attention to Rousseau on art, although Thérèse Levasseur, who never wrote, must have the last word on Rousseau.

SH: What then is Shiner arguing that you agree with?

RT: He is advancing an argument which is very important and which seems to be very difficult to fully understand. In fact I don't think Shiner fully grasps its implications. His starting point and mine stems from work done in the history of ideas by Paul Kristellar and Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz. This is work done back in the 1950s and '60s. He is also aware of the work of Raymond Williams. The outcome of this is the contention that our central concept of art, that is how it is that we, as contemporary people, can even talk about art, was invented – and this word 'invented' needs amplifying – in and around the 18th century. The dating is involved and complicated because what is being explored is the identity of a new, social process. Currently the cognoscenti in *a priori*, Hegelian mode moot the end of art, the death of art etc., but the thesis about the invention of art is the thesis that art did not exist before the 18th century. Also part of the thesis is that this invention was the invention of European, increasingly bourgeois, increasingly capitalist society; therefore the thesis is that for the rest of the world art did not exist. So Shiner details, as does *Art an Enemy of the People*, how other cultures had no concept of art, no word for art... no word in African languages, no word in Japanese, no word in Chinese etc. The big argument here in its simplest form is that the concept of art is not universal, that it is a specific life form emerging at a particular time to satisfy a range of highly particular social needs. This Shiner and myself agree on. Where my book puts this forward as a hypothesis, Shiner verifies the hypothesis, beyond all reasonable doubt. The implications of this argument are very difficult to get into people's heads.

SH: But Shiner and you differ.

RT: Well I differ. And the difference is at gut level, at the level of class. Shiner dedicates his book to the memory of his mother 'whose', as he says, 'love of music, art and literature was the beginning of this book'. This phrase is nuanced, you have to hear it very clearly to know what is going on, and it is not the world of my childhood. My auntie played piano, when everyone was tanked up and Mother Brown was in the mood to raise her knees, and the lad next door used to astonish me with an old, chewed, lead pencil and a scrap of paper, conjuring up the face of Susan Hayward. This was not the love of music, art and literature. Shiner and myself agree about the invention of art and up to a point

we agree about causes but we do not really agree about effects. *Art an Enemy of the People* situates this *invention* as bourgeois ideology through and through, helping to promote this social order to the detriment of the proletariat, with no redeeming features; what the book calls ‘an enemy of the people’. Larry Shiner on the other hand waters down the possible implications of *invention*. After all it is not as though only universals have value, *inventions* have value, the social process may have allowed something of value to surface, something to come to know itself. Moreover, Shiner argues that the invention of art grew out of an older concept of art; so watch out, where before art did not exist, it begins to put in a progenitorial appearance.

Quite rightly Shiner picks up on what Kristellar has to say about etymological links between the usages of the word ‘art’ in various languages from the 17th and 18th centuries onwards and previous usage, but this is not the same as conceptual identity. In European culture the Ancient and Medieval worlds had words that link etymologically but which designated something entirely different. ‘Art’ meant any rule bound activity, producing artefacts etc., as opposed to things in nature. In this sense there were many arts, many different rule bound activities, many different teachable disciplines, the language reflecting probably a certain fetishism surrounding the emergence of the division of labour, and so not necessarily some healthy, humanised, whole conceptual practice.

Shiner tends to see this as a more integrated social whole, before the separation of art and craft, which separation the *invention* of art brings about. This is a regrettable fracturing of experience and activity for Shiner, and although he does not think you can put the clock back he does look forward to some third system of art, beyond the old art and beyond the modern concept of art, where everything can be healed. This is presented as an integration and synthesis of utility, pleasure, cognition, and spirituality. This would be an end of elitism, a reintegration of art and life, a reconceiving of aesthetics in terms of ordinary pleasure and everyday functions, but at the same time preserving embodied meaning and spirituality. Shiner provides some examples, ‘the pleasure of a bath’, ‘sound of rain on a roof’, ‘conversation and sounds of drinking at a tea ceremony’, the kitchen knife which feels good in the hand, the experience of its weight and balance and how it cuts, smoothly, effortlessly. I love Marx but here we are on the edge of some of his worst, Hegelian excesses, the return to species being, our return to the innocent childhood of mankind (the Greeks!), almost the state of nature, a new social contract, general, universal interest... after all the fractures, alienation and dehumanisation.

SH: So you are rejecting this triptych, the old sense of art, the modern and a third system, which Shiner says has to be won through continuous struggle?

RT: Absolutely. The proletariat has too many things to worry about without the additional struggle to acquire an expensive kitchen knife from John Lewis or afford a Zen experience at Center Parcs. It is wrong to talk about an older sense of art. It’s a category mistake like confusing the legs of a Chippendale table with the legs of Betty Grable. Moreover, although Shiner has a real sense of commercialisation and how it rests in post-modernism he does not detect what has happened to art, namely its ‘commodification’.

SH: Neither of your books explore the work of art as a commodity. These books were published a long time ago, has your thinking changed?

RT: Not long after the publication of *Beyond Art* I gave up being a professional philosopher. In my own eyes I switched from a role in the passive bourgeoisie to a role as *agent provocateur*. This was a romanticised perception. The methodological imperatives of *Art an Enemy of the People* required continuous, empirical investigation of conceptual life. Anyone who thought my book had arrived at some definitive understanding of art would not have followed the argument properly. The use of words, the life of concepts is an historical and social thing, an interactive, temporal process. This is

what is meant by my assertion in the book that ordinary language concepts are open. This methodology opened the way for the anti-essentialist assertion that the concept of art was not universal. It had a clear beginning and this fact is at variance with the ideological pretensions surrounding the concept.

*Art an Enemy of the People* pointed out that this thesis was not to be confused with the uncontentious assertion that art has a history. The concept of art has radically changed. Art has ceased to be an exclusive sanctuary of the bourgeoisie, a sort of Schatzalp at Davos Platz for moneyed invalids. It has ceased signifying a spirituality, a higher calling, a mode of discernment and superiority for a narrow elite, something just for them, an alternative to the grubbing commerciality, mass uniformity and vulgarity of economic life in which all are implicated. Suddenly all were admitted, a bit like the bourgeoisie of Petrograd being ordered to share their domestic accommodation with the proletariat. The form of life changed. But the form of life was always prey to its signifiers, more logo than use value, like some medieval buying of indulgences to signify spiritual fidelity without the pain of saintly observances.

Moreover, as the ideology of art developed within the rise of the bourgeoisie, the life of art always existed as the business of art, the art business, although positioned in the *haute couture* sector of markets. Basically what there is to understand is how a specific speciality market became a mass market of specialties, and how everything else in the form of life ultimately was subsumed under the life of the market. This is what art has become... the art business initially, but then subsumed under the leisure business, reappearing there as a logo denoting amorphous quality.

We are looking at the market's creation of individuality, the groups this spawns and by implication an art market with its myriad of opposing fan clubs. Art as a universalising logo of quality for commodities enters all markets quite apart from its use in those areas of the market where the grouping of objects still owes something to the history of art as an ideological tool. Serious commentators will talk seriously about the art of football, the beautiful game, the footballer as artist. Similarly, cars are written about as works of art, Ferrari, Jaguar, BMW, Audi, Aston Martin. Currently a Citroën displays Picasso's signature. Within these areas of the market there will be clear examples which are not included – Vinnie Jones, the Robin Reliant – but even these can invade other markets and as a result gain cult status which opens the doors to interpretation as art. Vinnie Jones in movies, the Robin Reliant in *Only Fools and Horses*. This is the not artistic becoming art through the frisson and shock of displacement, aping Duchamp's urinal, Tracey Emin's bed. All these commodities essentially fulfil their purpose in purchase; everything else is secondary, demanded by the economics of time and the system's mechanisms. Your life may be reduced to working and buying but at least what you buy is art. You feel better than those who shop at Matalan and are happy with Real Abba recordings. Those who talk of the end of art, the death of art are ideological dinosaurs. Art is as alive as is Levi's, Coca-Cola etc., but there is nothing here that I want.

SH: So although you have written extensively about art, this is actually something that repels you.

RT: As a form of life, art is like cancer. It takes over and colonises other forms of life so that it becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other. The long chapter on jazz in *Art an Enemy of the People* is an attempt to detail how this happens, how jazz becomes art, how jazz gets cancer. I return to my aunty playing piano for a sing song at the end of the Second World War, my friend drawing Susan Hayward, or, perhaps, the Eastville faithful singing Leadbelly's *Goodnight Irene* to try to inspire Bristol Rovers to beat Newcastle in the sixth round of the FA Cup. These passions of mine were subverted by educational success so that I was called on to deny them and replace them with vague resemblances in the world of art and culture. Paradoxically if now I wished rapprochement with art, my passions could be reinstated provided there was some mechanism whereby they could be repackaged and sold back to me. Of course, given where I came from my seduction by art was always

at the extremes of the form of life: the ecstatic protestations of the Romantic poets, the drunken passages of Stephen Dedalus around Dublin, the ‘buggerall’ attitude of Dylan Thomas, Max Beckman’s ‘degenerate’ paintings, the nihilism of Ginsberg in *Howl*, etc. But what I realised as I began to generate my critique of art was that my subverted passion, which did not know its name, was a passion for what I now call virtuality, what I call in my book *Beyond Art* ‘the as if’. If you are asking me what it is now that challenges my philosophical interests, it is to give a full account of virtuality, including its implications for moral and political philosophy and revolutionary praxis.

And, of course, going back to Shiner’s notion of the older concept of art, which as I have stated isn’t a concept of art at all, we find in the Greek notion of rule bound activities a distinction between liberal and mimetic skills. The Greek world soon had it in for the mimetic. The whole Socratic tradition is an attack on mimesis and an espousing of the cognitive and religious forms of life of the ruling class... aspects of class rule and suppression of mimetic mindlessness of rabble and slaves. These reactionary thoughts in very different forms still abound. Arthur Danto, a philosopher whose reputation gives Larry Shiner pause for reflection, has developed an argument where art comes to an end at the point that it fulfils itself, shaking off, through the development of Modernism, its lamentable preoccupation with mimetic forms to reveal itself as the sanctuary of ‘embodied meaning’. Plato’s pure forms made real for all to see in the spaces of the ‘new museology’.

SH: Could you give us a handle on this notion of virtuality? Does it relate to virtual reality? How does it differ from bourgeois escapism?

RT: Well, actual virtual reality is by and large *commodified* virtual reality. Notions of autonomy, infinite possibility and the genuineness of alternatives are seriously compromised by a content formed to meet first and foremost the dictates of market forces. The commodity is designed for the consumer and the consumer has been influenced to desire the commodity. The consumers’ capacity for alternative/substitute virtual worlds is dependent on the formed consciousness of the consumer and this consciousness has been raised in an environment of impoverishment. Part of my subject matter is to give serious treatment to the notion of ‘getting out of it’, another part concerns who is to get out. The inevitabilities of the poor are the factum, the starting point. What does Bear the surfboard maker in *Big Wednesday* say as the surf heroes ride the unprecedented? ‘Oh! I’m just the garbage man.’ Generally the poor are addressed to improve them, educate them, edify them, empower them, sensitise them, quiet them, control them. These are the stratagems for creating illusions of change. So, it is argued, the rich are going to have to overcome a hell of a hump to get into heaven, whereas queuing garbage men are the last made first. For this illusory privilege they are exhorted to love those who trespass against them. My work is firmly set in the notion of irreconcilable enemies. Being poor is to confront reality as problematic, something to defend oneself against, something to be escaped from. ‘Getting out of it’ is defence and escape, and virtuality is one of the forms of ‘getting out of it’. Socially developed and controlled forms of virtuality are generally *commodified*, but *commodified* entertainment is bootlegged like booze and has its non-*commodified* forms like potteen and alpine *eau de vie*. And, of course the objects of art can be appropriated for any purpose whatsoever, just as art has appropriated the objects of not art as objects of art.

## INFO

A full-length version of this interview is in the M-Files section on *Metamute*  
[<http://www.metamute.com>]

Roger Taylor is a writer, pensioner, and former lecturer in philosophy. He is currently writing an immense work on virtuality. More of his philosophy and fiction can be found online at  
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Stewart Home is the author of several books of fiction and cultural commentary; his most recent book is *Down & Out In Shoreditch & Hoxton*, Do-Not Press, £7.99