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## Art as Communication

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The one rule which may not be broken in contemporary art and literature is the rule that art has no rules. The dominant aesthetic rejects the notion that there are any restraints on what artists can or should do, with aesthetic value being measured mainly in terms of the extent to which a work of art or literature breaks with convention. Whether the artist does *meaningful* work or not is irrelevant; what counts is *originality*. Originality itself has become an aesthetic norm, the criteria some may choose to separate “good” art from “bad.” Art is judged not for the insight it provides but for its shock value, i.e., how much attention a work of art is capable of drawing to itself rather than the extent to which it is capable of communicating a significant message to others.

It can be argued that this aesthetic has exhausted itself. Artists who continue to strike the pose of the rebel have come to look ridiculous, while the art they produce has become as predictable and boring as the work they purport to be rebelling against. Art has entered an de-evolutionary spiral in which the immunity of audiences to shocking art means that artists can only express “originality” through the creation of even more shocking art. The result is the creation of an “excremental culture” (*cf.* Kroker and Cook 1991), which it is hardly prudish, elitist, or snobbish to want to stick one’s nose up at.

We have gone about as far as we can with the paradoxical idea that originality best expresses itself through the breaking of rules that no longer exist. If there are in fact no more rules to be broken, then there is nothing more to rebel against. The battle for artistic freedom is over. The artists have won. The challenge now is to create works of art and literature that genuinely transform how we look at and act in the world. This is hardly a plea for conservatism, but rather for an authentically radical art

that takes as its aim the total transformation of both individual and social consciousness.

Contemporary debates over art and aesthetics have become polarized between two main tendencies. On the one side are aesthetic conservatives who want to maintain what they perceive to be certain universal and objective criteria regarding what constitutes “good art.” On the other side are aesthetic liberals who see any attempt to impose standards on what artists do as stifling and oppressive. The conservatives often ally themselves with attempts to censor or withdraw public financial support from artists they find offensive. They are reactionary in the sense that they want artists to go back to producing the good, “wholesome” art that was supposedly produced in the past; hence, the need to uphold certain traditionally agreed-upon standards.

While aesthetic liberals occasionally do produce work that is genuinely transformative, they are also reactionary to the extent that they define themselves not in relation to an authentic vision of the future, but rather simply in opposition to conventional sensibilities; hence, the widespread view that there are no valid standards for separating good from bad art. “Freedom” is equated with the absence of standards, while aesthetic judgement is reduced to a matter of personal taste. Such a view is characteristic of contemporary “postmodern” culture which contends that there are no universal, objective truths. Knowledge, morality, and art are privatized rather than located in a wider interactive public sphere in which ideas can be engaged in and contested.

The view proposed here attempts to break through this dichotomy by agreeing first of all with aesthetic liberals that there are no universal standards for knowledge, morality, art, and all the rest. Standards are themselves human creations, or *constructs*, which cannot be read directly out of the nature of things. But it can also be agreed with aesthetic conservatives that good art cannot be produced in the absence of any standards whatsoever. Freedom should not be construed as the view that there are no standards — a view that simply leads to aesthetic mush — but rather with the view that whatever standards we choose to accept are standards which are freely chosen.

This constructivist perspective (there is no direct connection between the ideas developed here and the movement in early 20th-century art which goes by the same name) can be applied equally well to the fields of knowledge, morality, and aesthetics. The world does not have any meaning or purpose beyond the meaning and purpose we give it; hence, the need for art that organizes our perception of the world and imbibes it with meaning and purpose. While standards are never absolute, neither are they purely arbitrary. As the neopragmatic philosopher Hilary Putnam (1987; see also Ruth Anna Putnam 1985) suggests, we make both facts and values. While there is no Universal Blueprint for how knives should be made, the knives we design fulfill real purposes and some designs can in fact be judged as being better than others.

Much the same for art. While there is no Universal Blueprint to tell us what constitutes “good art,” and while whatever standards we come up with are indeed human creations, there is still the need to construct those standards. It is only through the construction of such standards that the world comes to have meaning and purpose.

Contemporary literary criticism eschews the holism implicit in the constructivist view in favor of a variety of reductionisms that cluster around one of three main focal points: the artist, the work itself, or the audience (*cf.* Eagleton 1983, p. 75).

Criticism which focuses on artists as such concerns itself with how artists express either their own individual aesthetic sensibility (Romantic criticism), the aesthetic sensibility of their age (Marxist criticism in the fashion of Althusser and Bakhtin; the so-called “new historicism” of Greenblatt), or motivations which remain largely unconscious to the artists themselves (the psychoanalytic criticism of Lacan and Bloom). While most of us no longer believe in the oracular contention that artistic inspiration arises through the agency of one’s Muse, the Romantic view nonetheless sees art primarily as a form of self-expression. Artists should pursue their individual visions and pay no attention to how audiences respond to their work. Audiences must more or less resign themselves to accepting whatever the artist has on offer, regardless of how obscure or myopic the work may be. Indeed, the greater a work’s obscurity or

myopia, the more “profound” it may appear to some. If the work is a failure it is not the artist’s fault, but rather the fault of those who “misunderstand” it — a formula which conveniently absolves artists from any responsibility to communicate something to their audiences. Historicist criticism restores a communal dimension to artistic expression, but commits the opposite error of reducing artists to nothing more than aesthetic conduits for historical forces beyond their own control; artists are mere puppets whose movements look so real that we take them as being their own.

Certainly there is much to be learned by focusing on an artist’s intentions. Why do artists produce the kind of work they do? What personal and social influences can be traced in their works? To what extent do an artist’s biography and social milieu contribute to the final product? All of these questions are valid, but they are by no means the only valid questions which can be asked. Critics who focus exclusive attention on the artist as a person often never get around to discussing the art itself.

It was largely as a reaction to criticism of this type that formalists such as F. R. Leavis in Britain and the New Critics in America sought to shift attention away from the artist towards the *work* the artist produces. While formalists have frequently expressed the view that literature must be connected to life (*cf.* Brooks and Warren 1960, p. xiii: “Poetry gives us knowledge . . . of ourselves in relation to the world of experience, and to that world considered, not statistically, but in terms of human purposes and values”), the movement also has a tendency to consider art in isolation from its all-too-human elements. According to the New Critics, literature cannot be understood either in terms of the author’s intentions (the “intentional fallacy”) nor in terms of how readers respond to an author’s work (the “affective fallacy”) but only in terms of “the work itself” (*cf.* Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954).

Formalist criticism concerns itself not with the content of artistic productions but rather with their form. Or rather, form and content are conflated. In Cleanth Brooks’ slogans, “form and content cannot be separated” and “form is meaning” (1951, p. 72). A work of art need not refer to anything outside of itself; the meaning of a work of art is the work

itself: “a poem should not mean but be.” When a critic complained that he had never seen women who looked like the ones Matisse painted, Matisse replied, “I do not paint women; I paint pictures.”

Art appreciation in this view is a matter of coming to understand the formal skills artists and writers employ to achieve the particular effects they do. Formalism is the brand of criticism most frequently taught in university English departments and adopted in writers’ workshops. While there is certainly much that can be gained by discussing a work in terms of its form and structure, too much attention is sometimes focused on technical minutia (“should the comma be placed here or there, or perhaps eliminated altogether?”) at the expense of substantive content. Ultimately the approach is unsatisfactory, not only because it ignores the artist’s expressive intentions, but also because it gives short shrift to any affective response the audience may have towards a work of art. The study of literature becomes a boring exercise in technical analysis, divorced from any larger concerns. Art is produced not for the possibilities it has to expand human awareness, but for its own sake — *art pour l’art*.

Formalism shares certain features with structuralism, i.e., the notion that art, literature, culture, language, and so forth, can be understood in terms of their formal properties or structure. The linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, for example, contended that language could be described entirely in terms of *signifiers* (words) and the *signified* (the concepts words refer to). Linguistics need not concern itself with the relationship between words and *referents*, i.e., the physical objects words are usually taken to represent. Language in this view is a purely formal system which makes no reference to anything outside of itself.

The similarity between structuralism and the formalist view that criticism need not concern itself with anything outside of the literary or artistic production itself should be obvious. It was, in fact, a formalist, Cleanth Brooks, who first wrote that poetry is a “simulacrum of reality” (1947, p. 213). In Brooks’ view, poetry itself is an experience, not simply a statement about experience. This idea, which was more fully worked out in postmodern semiotics (*cf.* Barthes 1967), sees art as nothing more than a system of signs having no relation with anything beyond itself. The

purpose of art is not to connect us to the world in which we live, work, procreate, and die, but rather to create a separate reality, a *virtual* reality. Art becomes artifice, an escape from rather than a return to the world we ordinarily assume to be the “real one.”

Poststructuralist critics take these ideas a step further by arguing that if structuralist assumptions are true, then meaning cannot logically reside in the work itself. Structuralists had already ruled out the possibility that meaning can be grounded in physical reality (since words refer not to physical things, but to mental concepts), yet how are we to know whether the particular meaning we read out of a given text or work of art is the same as the meaning that someone else reads out of it? Does the text itself constrain how the text can be interpreted? Derrida and other poststructuralists argued that it cannot: any text can be deconstructed to show that there is no single interpretation which counts as the correct interpretation. Valéry expressed a similar idea when he wrote, “. . . [T]here is no true meaning of a text. No author’s authority. Whatever he may have wanted to say, he wrote what he wrote. Once published, a text is like an implement that everyone can use as he chooses and according to his means . . .” (quoted in Glasersfeld 1995, p. 49).

We have moved here from the Romantic position where the author is everything to the postmodern conclusion that the author is dead (*cf.* Barthes 1975). Everything depends not on what the author *intended* to write (which in any event can never be fully discerned) nor on what the author actually *did* write (which is susceptible to a plurality of interpretations), but rather on how the author is *taken* by his readers (each interpretation has equal validity).

There is, then, a third type of criticism which focuses on neither artists nor their works, but rather on how audiences *respond* to works of art. “Reader-response,” or “reception,” theories of criticism (Iser 1978 is representative) focus on how meaning arises not out of the artist’s intentions nor out of the work itself, but rather out of the responses of readers. Louise Marie Rosenblatt (1978), following John Dewey, speaks of literature as a “transaction” between reader and text. Indeed, the text constrains how the reader might interpret it, but the particular set of lived experi-



ences and philosophical assumptions that readers bring with them to the text also influence how it will be understood. The purpose of art in this view is not self-expression nor the creation of technically accomplished works of art; rather, artists seek to construct aesthetic structures which audiences can fill in with their own experiences. The goal is not so much to produce art as it is to create space in which art can happen.

Language poetry is an example. For language poets, “. . . language is not something that *explains* or *translates experience*, but it is the source of experience” (Douglas Messerli, quoted in Watanabe 1990, p. 29). The author makes no attempt to determine in advance what the final meaning of a poem is or should be; the meaning rather arises out of the particular ways in which various people read and respond to it. The artist who carried this basic idea furthest was perhaps John Cage; his composition “4’33” consists of nothing but a pianist sitting in front of a piano for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, not playing even a single note. Cage does not present his audience with music as such, but rather with soundless space that the audience can fill in as it wishes. The same effect might be achieved by presenting only a blank canvas as a painting or a blank page as a poem.

Pushed to these extremes the distinction between art and reality begins to blur. All is reduced to a mystic silence, a void which can be regarded either nihilistically as the death of all art or affirmatively as the empty space in which new things can happen. At this point, everything becomes art, including self, society, and nature. What we then seek to transform is not the arrangement of paint on a canvas, notes in a musical score, or words on a page, but ourselves and the world we live in. Life itself becomes rich with possibilities. We experience not the mere representation of a sunset, but the glory of the sunset itself, directly and immediately, with a fresh awareness. Thoreau acknowledged the immediacy of life over art when he wrote, “My life has been the poem I would have writ, / But I could not both live and utter it” (1950, p. 422).

This view leads us beyond art as it is normally understood, indeed towards a form of anti-art which sees art itself as an illusion, a finger pointing to the moon but not the moon itself. Plato adopted a similar stance in his Myth of the Cave: a group of people are chained in a cave,

with a fire behind them projecting their shadows onto the wall they are facing. The prisoners take the shadows for reality itself, but the shadows are in fact only a kind of prototypical virtual reality (which we can take here as representing the simulcra of art). One of the prisoners manages to free himself from his chains and ascends from the cave to the open air. When he first sees the sun, he is blinded, but as his eyes begin to focus he realizes that what he had previously taken to be reality is not reality at all; a whole new world has literally opened itself up before him. He returns to the cave, anxious to tell the others of his discovery, but when he tries to explain to them what he has experienced, they refuse to believe him and presumably spend the rest of their lives experiencing nothing more than the sight of their own shadows projected onto the wall.

The problem here — how the person who has left the cave can communicate the new world he has found to the others — is the problem of how anyone who has attained a new level of consciousness can communicate that awareness to those who are not even aware that other levels of consciousness exist. The solution to this problem is not art, but experience. The words and images artists use to communicate their experiences should not be understood as ends in themselves but rather as devices intended to lead an artist's audience to new levels of awareness.

Byzantine art has this objective. On the one hand, icons serve the didactic purpose of transmitting the Christian message. On the other hand, they do not simply represent, but also *embody*, religious truths intended to transform those who view them. The image of Christ becomes the image of what religious devotees themselves can become; the same spirit incarnate in the icon can incarnate itself in the devotee. Iconography avoids idolatry by insisting that religious truth also transcends the icon itself. Anything that might be said or imagined limits the possibilities for what might be; hence the need in the Orthodox tradition for an apophatic theology which, like Zen, contends that ultimate truth cannot be captured in words and images. Art lies in the realm of the cataphatic; it is not the truth itself but a metaphor of the truth, something that recreates itself differently in different individuals and therefore cannot be exhausted by any individual manifestation. For those of us who remain in the cave, at

lower levels of awareness, living in a cloud of illusion, art requires both immanence and transcendence.

One way of thinking about how the various critical perspectives examined thus far can be related to one another is to see art as a form of communication in which an “addresser” (the artist) communicates a “message” (the work of art) to an “addressee” (the reader or audience) (*cf.* Jakobson 1960). Whereas Romantic, psychoanalytic, and historicist criticism have tended to focus on the first component of this series, formalism on the second, and reader-response theories on the third, it should be clear that none of these “methods” exhausts the possibilities of how a work of art can be meaningfully interpreted. Each contributes to a better understanding of art, but the tendency to privilege one method above the others is reductionistic. While none of the approaches is “wrong,” each by itself is *inadequate* precisely because each leaves out of account some significant aspect of aesthetic experience. Meaning does not exist solely in the artist’s intentions, nor in the work itself, nor in the (differing) subjective interpretations of the audience but rather in the interplay between the three; art involves the co-creation of meaning on the part of both artist and audience.

It is impossible to understand Van Gogh’s *Gauguin’s Armchair*, for example, without knowing something about the tumultuous circumstances in which it was painted. The painting was completed in December 1888, the same month that Van Gogh threatened Gauguin with a razor and then cut off his own ear, prompting Gauguin’s departure from Arles. Without this knowledge the chair is just a chair; with this knowledge the chair acquires a significance it would not have otherwise. The painting also cannot be understood apart from the formal techniques which Van Gogh employed in executing it and his overall contribution to the shift from an impressionist to a post-impressionist style. Finally, the painting cannot be adequately understood unless we ourselves, as viewers, are able to relate it to our own experience; the painting may evoke, for example, reflection on our own complicated relationships with others. Each viewer will bring something different to the painting, depending upon his or her past experiences. These experiences will vary not only from person to person,

but also across cultures and historical periods, suggesting that the same work of art can acquire entirely novel meanings as the circumstances in which the work is read or viewed change.

Not all artists produce art that fits this communicative model, of course, and there are undoubtedly myriad other factors that might be considered in determining what counts as worthwhile art. Any model, even the most comprehensive, is bound to be a simplification of the reality it purports to deal with. It can nonetheless be argued that art which is produced with communicative intent is better than art which is not simply because the former achieves more. Artists who have nothing to express, or who are unconcerned about the formal properties of their work, or who have no interest in the effect their work has on others, achieve less than artists who produce art with each of these factors in mind. It is readily acknowledged that there is nothing absolute about these standards; they are intentionally *constructed* to distinguish between art that might be worth engaging oneself with and art that is not. Other standards can be developed, of course, and perhaps after a bit of dialogue we may even be able to arrive at some kind of intersubjective agreement regarding what we collectively believe to be good art. None of this implies that there is a certain set of rules artists *must* follow — artists can continue to damn well do as they please! The question being asked here is not “What should artists do?” but rather “Why should we, as an audience, pay attention?”

The idea of communicative art is clearly connected to the notion of community. In place of the Romantic conception of artists starving in the garret, striving to express themselves in a cold, cruel world that is indifferent to their genius, we have the idea of artists attempting to connect up with others — to *communicate*. This is not the same thing as prostituting oneself for fame or commercial gain. It still involves being faithful to one’s vision, but with the intent of communicating something of value to others, to raise the consciousness of others, and to allow one’s own consciousness to be raised in return. In the process both artist and audience are transformed.

This brings us to a fourth critical perspective which has not yet been mentioned, namely, moral criticism, a view that is often associated with

conservative stuffiness and prudery but one that, rightly understood, goes far beyond the supposed radicalism of liberal self-indulgence. The best Marxist criticism and nearly all feminist criticism qualifies as moral criticism. Moral criticism concerns itself not, as historicist criticism does, with how society influences an artist's work but rather with how an artist's work influences society. And whereas reader-response theories largely focus on how a work influences individual readers, moral criticism focuses on how a work influences society as a whole.

Tolstoy, whose approach to criticism was a fusion of both anarchism and mysticism, argued that artists must not only be able to see things more deeply than others and to give these insights beauty of expression; they must also establish a moral relation with their audience in which the ultimate aim is the creation of a good society. "Art," Tolstoy wrote, "is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them" (1960, p. 51).

A moral aesthetic is frequently denigrated by those who preach that aesthetics, morality, and all the rest are a matter of personal preference — especially *consumer* preference. Good art is what sells. Community — the idea of people actually organizing themselves against oppression — is what classic liberals who share this view fear most; hence, the divide-and-conquer strategy of Western individualism. Liberalism justifiably argues that art which merely places itself in the service of ideology loses its critical edge. Conventional religious art and a great deal of Marxist "social realism" readily fit this category, given that the goal of such art is not to explore and communicate but rather to propagate predetermined religious or political dogmas.

Liberalism opposes such communalism with its own dogma of "individual freedom." "Freedom" is conceived, however, entirely in voluntarist terms; liberals completely ignore the extent to which individual thought and action are socially conditioned and not merely a matter of "free choice." They ignore, therefore, the extent to which morality and aesthetics are social, and not simply individual, concerns. Marxist determinism

goes too far in the other direction, of course, by seeing individuals as having no control over their historical destinies. Art is reduced to a purely social affair in which individual artists are obliged to give up any pretense of originality or vision.

The constructivist view, introduced above, sees the relationship between the individual and society in dialectical terms. That is, individuals both transform and are transformed by their social environments. The self cannot completely realize itself except in the context of community (what is the point of writing a novel if nobody reads it?), and communities, moreover, cannot achieve their fullest potential in the absence of self-actualizing individuals. As individuals we are socialized into certain communal forms of thought and behavior, including most of our attitudes towards art and aesthetics. Nietzsche believed that the majority — the “herd” — could never arise above such conventionality and, therefore, that social change could only occur through the agency of a superhuman minority.

Clearly some measure of personal autonomy must be preserved if individuals are not to remain completely submerged in a sea of social conditioning. Contra Nietzsche, however, it can be argued that the process of “breaking out” of the herd mentality is in principle achievable by anyone and that it takes two main forms. The first results in *alienation* — the belief that once we step outside of the conventional rules we enter a realm beyond good and evil in which there are no rules whatsoever. Shock rocker Marilyn Manson once said in an interview, “Rock n’ roll has always been made to piss people off, and somebody has to hold up that tradition.” It can be contended, however, that the purpose of rock n’ roll, at least as it manifested itself in the 1960s, was never to piss people off but rather to take a stand on controversial issues and liberate people from social repression — e.g., to be *for* civil rights and *against* the Vietnam War. The fact that some people get pissed off at those who try to stand up for social justice is not the intended goal but simply a side-effect.

Alienated art does not in itself challenge the status quo; it steps outside of existing social norms but does not work to change them. It shows the end result of life as it is lived in depersonalized capitalist societies but does

not go very deep into exposing the root causes. It simply walks away from the mess, thumbing its nose in retreat. Art becomes spectacle (*cf.* Debord 1983), something that diverts attention away from our problems rather than something that helps us work through them.

A more genuinely radical art would perform two functions. First, it would offer a critique of ourselves as we are and society as it is. Such a critique would go beyond a mere description of the current state of affairs, i.e., realism. It would instead trace out the connections between alienation and social oppression in all its forms — from class domination to racial, gender, and environmental domination.

Second, it would offer us imaginative visions of a better society — guiding visions that structure our present actions towards the complete overthrow of oppression and the creation of a New Jerusalem. Critique alone is insufficient; we also need to propose alternative models of the world as we would like it to be — not mere fantasies that lead us away from reality but utopian goals that transform it.

The primary defect of our present culture is that it lacks imagination. Beauty — and this has nothing to do with pretty postcards or greeting-card verse — is not something that we find in the world, but something we create. Advanced capitalist culture constantly presents us with ever-more explicit images of violence but offers few models for dealing with conflict in non-violent ways. Indeed, violence becomes an end in itself. While one can decry the hypocrisy of family life depicted in *Father Knows Best*, one can equally decry the realism of *The Simpsons*, which indeed gives us some insight into contemporary families “as they are” but nothing useful on how to improve them. Art that is genuinely *avant garde* does not simply wallow in the mud; it shows us a way out.

While guiding visions are almost always produced by prophetic individuals exploring new possibilities, they are only authenticated in the context of community. To the extent that we do not wish to follow the visions of tyrants or oligarchs, a viable vision of the future must be a shared vision of the future, and this means democratizing the aesthetic process. We need to transcend the capitalist image of artists as producers who make aesthetic products for consumption by an audience — in which

success is judged, moreover, by how high a price a painting can fetch or how many copies of a novel are sold.

The professionalization of the arts has a deleterious effect on both artists and audiences — on artists because it allows them to live in aesthetic ivory towers detached from life as it is lived by the rest of us, making their work for the most part irrelevant; on audiences because it obliges us to follow the visions of “experts” instead of striving to create new visions of our own. The democratization of art would mean more people getting involved in the process of making art and sharing it with others.

Democratization does not mean compromise or bringing art down to the level of the “masses.” Such condescension is in fact what the professionalization and commercialization of art are all about. We are told that the “high arts” (ballet, opera, and the like) are elitist, while popular culture (television, movies, and popular music) represents the triumph of democratic taste. To the contrary, the form art takes has absolutely nothing to do with its content. While it can readily be acknowledged that some opera is bad and some movies are good, popular culture is probably the most highly commercialized of all forms of artistic expression, controlled neither by artists nor by audiences but rather by a capitalist class that owns, as with everything else, the means of production. Pop culture can only become profitable by dumbing down aesthetic sensibility and pandering to the least common denominator.

The democratization of art does not reduce people to being simply the passive consumers of junk culture; instead it invites them to actively explore their inner creativity and to share that creativity with others. Culture becomes participatory. Such a culture overcomes the social division between those who produce and those who consume art. It deflates the egos of those aspiring to be artists, but raises up those who are at present too busy consuming the work of others to produce anything creative on their own. Art should not be a profession, but something engaged in by everyone. Art without a grounding in life is bloodless, just as life without an aesthetic vision of the world is not worth living. We need to maintain a flow in which life informs art and art informs life.

The true proletarianization of art would resemble the proletarianization



of sports. Sports have also become highly professionalized and commercialized, of course, and for many the experience is purely vicarious: sports is not something you do but something you watch. Nonetheless, there are countless sports clubs in which individuals participate for the sheer pleasure of it. Some of these people work very hard at developing their skills, not with a view towards becoming professionals but with view towards becoming the best that they themselves can be. Individuals don't develop this potential by simply sitting at home in front of the TV; it's something they have to actively participate in.

Art should be the same way, not engaged in with a view towards becoming "professional," but with a view towards developing one's creative talents and sharing them with others. Overall standards do not fall, but rise. Artistic activity of this type needs to be actively supported through the creation of outlets which provide an alternative to the mainstream, for-profit media. We need to create and maintain a variety of different forums — alternative publications and alternative gathering places — where artists and writers can share their work with each other. It is only through such sharing that real transformation becomes possible.

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