

Essay on the Nature and the Becoming of Art, sans date

Auteur(s) : Malaquais, Jean

Les folios

En passant la souris sur une vignette, le titre de l'image apparaît.

5 Fichier(s)

Les mots clés

[Essai](#), [Projet](#), [Théorie artistique](#)

Présentation

DateSans date

GenreEssai

Information générales

LangueAnglais

SourceArchives Jean Malaquais. Harry Ransom Center (Texas)

Description & Analyse

DescriptionProjet de Malaquais concernant un futur essai de théorie artistique. Il indique travailler sur ce sujet depuis le début de 1946 et veut réfléchir à ces questions aux Etats-Unis et en Europe. Le projet est subdivisé en trois points :

- 1) Le caractère spécifique de l'art littéraire
- 2) La nature phénoménologique de l'art
- 3) Le devenir de l'art (avec comme conclusion : "The becoming of Art is man himself; or, in other words, man, in becoming his own work of Art, transcends Art".)

Informations sur l'édition numérique

Editeur de la ficheVictoria Pleuchot (Société Jean Malaquais) ; EMAN, Thalim (CNRS-ENS-Sorbonne nouvelle)

Mentions légales

- Fiche : Victoria Pleuchot (Société Jean Malaquais) ; EMAN (Thalim, CNRS-

ENS-Sorbonne nouvelle). Licence Creative Commons Attribution – Partage à l'Identique 3.0 (CC BY-SA 3.0 FR)

- Texte de Malaquais : avec l'aimable autorisation d'Elisabeth Malaquais (ayant-droits)

Citer cette page

Malaquais, Jean, *Essay on the Nature and the Becoming of Art*, sans date, Sans date.

Victoria Pleuchot (Société Jean Malaquais) ; EMAN, Thalim (CNRS-ENS-Sorbonne nouvelle).

Site *Archives numériques de Jean Malaquais*

Consulté le 27/12/2025 sur la plate-forme EMAN :

<https://eman-archives.org/Malaquais/items/show/93>

Notice créée par [Victoria Pleuchot](#) Notice créée le 16/04/2024 Dernière modification le 21/02/2025

ARTIST

Provisional title:

WHAT IS THE NATURE AND THE BECOMING OF ART

Three principal chapter headings subdivide this work: 1) The particular character of literary art; 2) The phenomenological nature of art; 3) The becoming of art.

- A) All the artistic disciplines are legitimate, independently of the moral value we place upon them. The fact that they assert themselves in our customs and take root there, indicates that they suit a certain stage of our existence. In this sense the disciplines of Art form specific techniques involved in the midst of, and aimed at the knowledge of reality, just as do speaking, weaving, or manufacturing stoves. But if speaking or weaving or itself depends on a natural necessity, the written word or the stove spring from acquired needs. For the sake of clarity a distinction will be made between natural necessity and acquired needs: it will be said, for example, that a stone axe corresponds to a natural necessity, but that a cannon corresponds to a social (acquired) need. In other words, since man exists, the weapon also exists: it is the "biological" attribute of man, whereas a certain type of weapon which has been evolved is no longer the attribute of man as such, but the social product of a given human civilization. The same is true of fire as against central heating, a shelter as against a dwelling-house, etc. The term "natural", in so far as it concerns man, will therefore be considered in its direct meaning: that which conforms with the laws of nature as opposed to that which is acquired at social needs: that which is in accord with social laws. Thus we shall say that it is "natural" to clothe oneself, but that it is "acquired" to weave. The term literature

being defined as the art of creating fiction (poetry), we shall advance the following proposition: wherever all the other arts are natural, literature is not a natural art.

- 2) It is taken as a postulate that in the first place art signifies an attempt to transcribe the tangible world symbolically. All activities which come under the general heading of artistic disciplines consist in an effort to grasp the world, to reduce it to the human scale, and ultimately to dominate it. Art is the history of man's combat with nature (nature taken here as a whole, both physically and socially). But unlike other disciplines (science, philosophy) which have recourse to rational categories in order to place, explain and finally apprehend the world, art in its pursuit of the same goals knows only symbolic categories. The straits between man and the hostile forces of nature being either the creation of a humanity through the domination of nature by man, or else the destruction of man by nature, the object of art -- independently of the artist's conscience -- is to express this conflict and to take part in it.

So long as the man-nature opposition remains the dominant characteristic of human existence, art will symbolically transcribe this opposition. At very distant primitive stages this symbolic language is confounded with the automatic reflexes. Thus the "savage" and the child invent art: they confront the world with an activity, the object of whose symbolism is to conjure up the reality into which they find themselves projected. Magical practices, in so far as they place a screen of symbols between the ego and the world, are obviously part of art. Making sounds, scribbling in sand, adorning one's body and bending in circles are just so many extremely complex attempts at creating a sense of security for oneself in the midst of a world which must be overcome.

joy, the fall of Icarus, etc., but I cannot dance my body itself. I cannot interpret itself: in being heard it projects a thousand things, but not itself. By sculpting wood or stone I create the most diverse objects, except stone and wood. When I apply paint to canvas I paint one thing or another; however art the touch of my brush, I shall have painted anything except colour itself: colour exists in the tube or in the pot; once it passes onto the canvas it is no longer colour but form. Furthermore, each of these materials is susceptible of identification by our senses. Their properties are non-abstract and remain constant to experience. Words, on the other hand, are a different matter. It is not the same with the material which enters into literary art, the words. Words have no objective properties. Their meaning is not tangible to our senses. It is possible with words to form words which are of things more than words. Taken individually, they are without meaning; aligned together, they have a multitude of meanings. Moreover, everything about words is abstract and symbolic. No word is measurable or quantifiable. When I say table, I am actually saying all tables, past, present and future. When I characterize a table as a low, high, yellow, loop-sided etc. one, I am merely communicating a subjective impression that I have of an object I call table. There is a break between the word and the object it designates; a hiatus due to the very word which is symbolizing the object. Between the word table and the real existence of a table, there is no direct relationship: the relationship can only establish itself by the intermediacy of the table-idea in his who perceives the word. Thus, the property of a word is neither indicative nor descriptive: it is evocative. The extremity of complication is reached when the word, symbol itself, tries to convey an abstract idea: for example, courage, love, etc., for which no physical equivalent exists. It would seem, then, that if the other arts symbolically transmute reality

- 4 -

- 5 -

with the aid of an objective (real) material, literature can only do so with the aid of a symbolic (abstract) material. Now, what constitutes a symbol is that its "magical" properties are expressed through the action of a material which is devoid of such properties (animal, plant, carving, etc.). God, at once the most common and the most universal of symbols, takes on a human face -- the least abstract "material" there is. A word, however, is a symbol quite apart from all others, in that it has only itself by means of which to express itself. It is its own material. This double identity, which is the exclusive product of a specific type of civilization, causes literature (fiction, and the Greek counterpart: poetry), to be the most universal human acquisition for the knowledge of reality.

- c) There is no Art without the will, conscious or unconscious, to change the world. This will corresponds with society about the unknown: it is not possible to survive in an environment over which one has no control. In this sense, symbols and art provide buffers for the unknown: they fill the gaps by abstract representations. A simple African mask may be an attempt at explaining the world, in any case an attempt to ~~be~~ done and subjugate the unknown by giving it a symbolic shape and content.

But the recourse to symbols in the relationship between the ego and the world signifies that I am not yet able to confront the world face to face. Art, while a form of knowing the world, manifests itself in inverse proportion to my effective knowledge of the world. In transcribing the world through the techniques of art, I attempt to express the world: the world is interpreted, but not apprehended. There are two prerequisites for the realization of this attempt: a) my action to free myself from the blind forces of nature; b) my action to dominate the natural

environment. As I advance in my destination of the world, I reduce by so much the phenomenological margin which feeds my anxiety about the unknown, anxiety which forces me to interpret the world by Symbol and Art. Art, a discipline in the knowledge of the world, in knowing the world, destroys itself.

Art is worth whatever the Symbol is worth. The Symbol, in its turn, is worth only as much as the state of conflict which persists between me and nature. Supposing that I emerge victorious from the conflict, and, confounding myself with nature, apprehend it in its totality, and that I exhaust my anxiety about the unknown by transcending it, — in supposing this I cancel between the world and myself the intermediary of the Symbol, and in so doing nullify the disciplines of Art. By dominating nature, by detaching myself from it, I become nature myself, and by nullifying Art, I become Art myself. The becoming of Art is van himself; or, in other words, man, in becoming his own work of Art, transcends Art.

Material for this book has been gathered since the beginning of 1905. The work is expected to be carried on in the U.S. and in Europe.