

Art and International Relations

Written by Alex Danchev

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ALEX DANCHEV, MAY 20 2014

"Excuses have absolutely no place in art, mere intentions do not count for anything, the artist has to listen to his instinct all the time, with the result that art is most real thing there is, the most austere school of life, and the true Last Judgement."

Marcel Proust

What can art do? What does IR care? A famous poet famously said that 'poetry makes nothing happen.' No war poem ever stopped a war, perhaps, though war poetry is the last word on the Western Front, as historians and IR specialists never cease to complain.[i] But war prevention is an obtuse criterion. Art has changed the world. More exactly, art continues to change the world. Its impact on our subject and our selves is more profound than we know. Our world turns. Our conception of ourselves and of others is destabilized, refashioned, enlarged. No one has put this better than Proust:

It is only through art that we can escape from ourselves and know how another person sees a universe which is not the same as our own and whose landscapes would otherwise have remained as unknown as any there may be on the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing only a single world, our own, we see it multiplied, and have at our disposal as many worlds as there are original artists, all more different one from another than those which revolve in infinity and which, centuries after the fire from which their rays emanated has gone out... still send us their special light.[ii]

In other words, the examined life is re-examined, self and other reassessed. That is the very stuff of International Relations.

Other words are indeed the point at issue. And other ways of thinking and feeling, creating and recreating. To quote another poet, 'the imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most truly grasp and comprehend it.' These are Seamus Heaney's words. 'Whatever is given,' he writes in his own idiom, 'can always be reimagined, however four-square, / Plank-thick, hull-stupid and out of its time / It happens to be.' This comes from his ruminations on what he calls the redress of poetry: the notion that poetry – art – can function as a sort of moral spirit level, individually and societally, nationally and internationally.[iii] The poetry of Walt Whitman functioned in this fashion for many Americans and, more recently, the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish for many Palestinians, though Darwish himself had his doubts:

I thought poetry could change everything, could change history and could humanize, and I think that illusion is very necessary to push poets to be involved and to believe, but now I think that poetry changes only the poet.[iv]

Perhaps that is a start.

In Anglo-American culture, artists are prone to be patronized, or ghettoized. Painters in particular are often supposed to be either stupid or vapid, and in any event inarticulate, unable or unwilling to explain themselves. Some painters connive at this conceit. In fact, many painters are capable writers and (whisper it softly) subtle thinkers. Barnett Newman is a fine example. Newman was an artist and a personality of uncommon power. He was also an anarchist – a real one – who contributed a forward to Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* in the quasi-revolutionary year of

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1968. He had a high concept of his calling. The artist's role is that of creator. The idea that he is merely a performer with a paintbrush is not one that Newman was prepared to entertain. 'During the last few years,' he admonished in 1951, that idea

has become popular among social theoreticians, particularly ex-Marxists, pseudo-existentialists, psychiatrists, historians and literary men in general (Malraux is typical), when they refer to painting. The artist is approached not as an original thinker in his own medium but, rather, as an instinctive, intuitive executant who, largely unaware of what he is doing, breaks through the mystery by the magic of his performance to "express" truths the professionals think they can read better than he can himself.[v]

A certain reorientation is needed. Martha Nussbaum writes perspicuously of treating poets 'not simply as people who might have written a treatise but didn't, nor yet simply as repositories of "popular thought", but as thinker-poets whose meanings and formal choices [are] closely linked'; we can adopt the formulation for thinker-painters, thinker-photographers, and all the other tribes of artist-creators.[vi]

We tend to underestimate the generative power of art – perhaps even the regenerative power of art – its capacity to nourish thought and sustain hope, its iconic properties, its fathomless quality, its uncanny futurity, its connective reach, its ethical freight, and its inspirational potential. Paintings like Braque's *Guitar Player* (1914) or Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) bear witness to the terrible twentieth century.[vii] Responses to them are woven into the fabric of the past. Yet the past is not past, as William Faulkner once said; it is remade every day. *Angelus Novus*, Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History', lives on, as messianic as ever.

We also tend to underestimate the transformational potential of art, and the exemplary quality of artists. If, in the final analysis, a great artist is a man who has lived greatly, as Albert Camus proposed, then Paul Cézanne seems to exemplify what is required. Cézanne shows us what human beings are capable of. His life story is the exemplary life story of the artist-creator in modern times. Countless artists take Cézanne as their model. And not only artists – poets and philosophers, writers and directors, thinkers and dreamers. D. H. Lawrence called him 'the sublime little grimalkin'; Heidegger testified that his philosophy was at once coherent and parsimonious. 'Cézanne was not a philosopher, but he understood all of philosophy. In a few words he summed up everything I have tried to express. He said: "Life is terrifying." I have been saying just that for forty years.'[viii] The sublime little grimalkin created a new world order. His way of seeing radically refashioned our sense of things and our relationship to them. He once said of his mighty *Woman with a Coffee Pot* (c.1895) that a teaspoon teaches us as much about ourselves and our world as a woman or a coffee pot. The revelations of Cézanne are akin to those of Marx or Freud. The transformational potential is as great. The impact on selves and our world is as far-reaching.

The thinker-photographer may be more self-aware than most. 'Taking a photograph is a political act,' as Trevor Paglen has aptly remarked. Paglen's trademark is ultra-long-distance photographs of drones and classified surveillance sites. Ethically and aesthetically, he makes visible what is otherwise invisible. Like Ai Wei Wei a world away – perhaps the single most significant artist-activist in the global polity – he is part image-maker, part intellectual: a deliberative subversive. 'I think art can help us call attention to certain things,' he muses. 'It can help contribute to the cultural vocabulary that we use.'[ix] Photography and democracy are intertwined. The photographer, too, is a witness – a moral witness, in Avishai Margalit's phrase. That is most obviously true of war photography or atrocity photography on the traditional model, as practised by Robert Capa or Don McCullin or James Nachtwey.[x] But it need not entail grand statements on elevated themes, taken in extremis. It might well entail a shopping trolley, like the one marooned in a car park at Tanger Factory Center in Gonzales, Louisiana, in a remarkable study by Richard Misrach.[xi] The power and the glory of photography is to elevate the everyday, to see something different beneath the material, beneath the familiar, beneath experience, beneath words, beneath heedless living. Photographs give us pause. 'A photograph can't coerce,' wrote Susan Sontag in homage to this act of witness. 'It won't do the moral work for us. But it can start us on the way.'[xii]

Art and International Relations have so much to say to each other, if they only but knew it. Poetry makes something happen after all. Not only does it make us feel, or feel differently; it makes us think, and think again. Rethinking the world is what IR is all about. Or so we suppose. Rethinking ourselves and our responsibilities to one another: that is

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the hard part. Art can help us with both. We go beyond ourselves, as Gadamer said, by penetrating deeper into the work. 'That "something can be held in our hesitant stay" – this is what art has always been and is still today.'[xiii] The famous poet knew this all along.

The primary function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us. I do not know if such awareness makes us more moral or more efficient: I hope not. I think it makes us more human, and I am quite certain it makes us more difficult to deceive, which is why, perhaps, all totalitarian theories of the state... have deeply mistrusted the arts. They notice and say too much, and the neighbours start talking.[xiv]

Notes

[i] Most recently, David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: the Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013). For an argument for poetry, broadly conceived, see Alex Danchev, 'The Real Waugh', *Diplomatic History* 25, 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 473-89; for a profound reflection on the war poetry of the Western Front in historical perspective, see Jon Stallworthy, *Survivors' Songs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[ii] Marcel Proust, trans. Ian Patterson, *Finding Time Again* [1927] (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 204-05.

[iii] Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber, 1995), pp. xv, 200, quoting his own poem, 'The Settle Bed', in *Opened Ground* (London: Faber, 1998), pp. 345-46. Heaney's affirmation serves as the credo and manifesto of my essays, *On Art and War and Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), offered as demonstrations in miniature of the potential for a kind of intersubjective understanding in this realm.

[iv] 'Mahmoud Darwish: Palestine's Poet of Exile', *The Progressive*, 9 August 2008.

[v] Barnett Newman, unpublished review of Thomas B. Hess, *Abstract Painting* (1951), in *Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 121-2. For Newman's own thinking, and the power of his example, see Alex Danchev (ed.), *100 Artists' Manifestos* (London: Penguin, 2011).

[vi] Martha Nussbaum, 'Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature', in *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 15. See Alex Danchev and Debbie Lisle, 'Art, Politics, Purpose', *Review of International Studies* 35, 4 (October 2009), pp. 775-79, the introduction to a special issue on art and war.

[vii] On the Braque, see *On Art and War and Terror*, ch. 3; on the Klee, 'The Angel of History', *International Affairs* 90, 2 (March 2014), pp. 367-77.

[viii] Lawrence, introduction to *Selected Critical Writings* (1929); Heidegger, conversation with André Masson (1956). See Alex Danchev, *Cézanne: A Life* (London: Profile, 2012), pp. 14 and 362.

[ix] Jonah Weiner, 'Prying Eyes', *New Yorker*, 22 October 2012; Michael D. Shear, 'Popular Culture Recasts Obama as Drone Master', *New York Times International Weekly*, 11 May 2014.

[x] See Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003).

[xi] See Alex Danchev, 'The Laws of Photography', in *Consumption* (London: Prix Pictet, 2014), where Misrach's photograph is reproduced.

[xii] Susan Sontag, 'Witnessing', in *Don McCullin* (London: Cape, 2013), p. 17.

[xiii] Hans-Georg Gadamer, trans. Nicholas Walker, 'The Relevance of the Beautiful' (1974), in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 53, quoting from Hölderlin's 'Bread and Wine'.

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[xiv] W. H. Auden, 'Introduction' to *Poems of Freedom* (1938), in Edward Mendelson (ed.), *The English Auden* (London: Faber, 1986), pp. 371-72.

About the author:

Alex Danchev is Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews, and the recipient of a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship for 2014-17. He has written extensively on art and political violence. Some of this work is gathered in an influential collection of essays, *On Art and War and Terror* (2011); a recent example is 'The Angel of History' in *International Affairs* (March 2014). He is the author of a number of internationally acclaimed biographies, ranging from Liddell Hart to Cézanne. He is currently working on a life of Magritte, and another collection of essays.