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Art is in the Doing: Diderot, Jankélévitch, and Artistic Agency

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“Generally speaking, expression is the image of feeling.”¹ The sentiment from Denis Diderot’s “Notes on Painting” sets up a discussion of just what ‘feeling’ is that it necessitates being set up as an image, as well as just how this ‘expression’ that relates to it works. Diderot follows his idea to a conclusion of good ‘expression’ concerned with painting, sculpture, and other visual arts in relation to the subjects within them and the necessity that they be shown as humans, not models. Expression as a word, however, has a multitude of possible applications merely within the realm of art, and a counterexample arises in Vladimir Jankélévitch’s *Music and the Ineffable*, where music is described as inherently inexpressive, without any direct connection to a ‘feeling’ in and of itself, and must react to itself as this inexpressive entity. However, in exploring the arguments of each, one sees a similar interest in a type of interaction with agency. By examining each idea of expressiveness in an artistic medium in the context of this agency, the two arguments can be reconciled, shown to be concerned with expecting the same things from the artistic process and the good artist.

There is a distinction in Diderot’s definition that is not made explicit but remains significant all the same: the distinction between feeling and emotion. Why are we meant to be unconcerned with the emotional aspect, in favor of the seemingly more nebulous ‘feeling?’ Feeling takes place as a particular manifestation of agency, whereas emotion is a constant for an agent. Emotions are blanket terms: the emotion of sadness might describe any number of particular feelings. For an example, compare the feeling of losing a treasured childhood object with the feeling of the untimely death of a loved one. Each can be described as a state of sadness in terms of the emotion, but as for the particular *feeling* of each situation, one would be hard-pressed to call them the same. In each case, the agent involved is sad, but the feeling is not necessarily similar.

In considering feeling, then, one is considering something much more complete than a simpler answer of the emotions involved, or really any kind of linguistic depiction of feeling. We turn to emotions as descriptors, not as definitive answers to a question of just what something is like. To know exactly how an agent feels, one must be able to account for the entirety of that agents' experience: his complete agency. So, in these terms put forward by Diderot, a good artist captures the complete agency of a subject in a particular state through their physiognomic expression. Good art necessarily engages expression with the principle that, "All posturing is false and trivializing; all action is beautiful and true."² Diderot specifically lashes out against painting models pretending to do something, claiming that as a model pretends they subvert the entire capacity of the agent they are trying to mimic.

In support of the idea of these particular types of agency, which by Diderot's line of thought need be expressed by physiognomic expression, he offers the expansion, "Each mode of living has its own character and expression."³ Diderot is here referencing the way a particular life depicts itself in physical form; not necessarily character traits but also the physical consequences of a lifestyle. Diderot has envisioned in expression a mode in which we can observe physically the agency of a person. The physiognomic expression in art serves to reveal the full nature of a subject when it is done well. Hence the failing of the model: a man pretending to live in the Great Depression for the sake of a painting or photograph is doomed to misrepresent it. The actual occurrences have not taken the visual physical toll we expect.⁴

The discussion thus far has a very clear bent towards visual art and what's more, visual art with engaging a human subject—or at the very least, some kind of subject that can appeal to physiognomic expression. So, between Jankélévitch and Diderot, we have a disconnect in the base material. How can one transpose this idea of transmission of agency as the higher calling of art into music is an interesting question. Within this idea of agency is encoded the capacity to act, to engage, to *do*. We would be remiss as well not to consider the common idea of 'artistic expression.' Diderot's expression thus far is focused on subject rather than artist, but there is no reason why the agency of the artist cannot apply in the same ways, particularly in consideration of abstract work that consists solely of artist and material.

Diderot's ideas are based in feeling, and his work extends to the expression of a particular subject at a particular moment so that one can explore that particular feeling in this agent. This conclusion is irritatingly specific. An agent is deemed capable of expressing in action; and Diderot wants to task the artist with capturing that action completely. This is not expression but *depiction* of expression: and if an agent expresses feeling through action and appearance, then the artist as an agent must also be capable of doing that. The term 'artistic expression' should be considered in this way—the making of art may result in a depiction, but *occurs* as expressive action. The expression of a painter is painting. 'Art' is in the doing.

This idea of expression appears to demand that it serves a type of linguistic function; that it contains some specific type of communicative aspect that is activated in the creation of an art object, be it sculpture or symphony, that will necessarily *explain* something. Jankélévitch calls it a “transcendence that is ascribed to intention.” The nature of men, in his eyes, wants “to make use of song and does not want song to make use of him.”⁵ We want to think of material as something that only responds to our whims and carries meaning; to define music as a sort of linguistic, communicative device and assume a metaphysics that it is in touch with *a priori*.

Jankélévitch writes off this idea of a linguistic art by pointing out a failing of a perceptible music versus an intelligible music: our ability to perceive does not reach into what he calls a “metamusic or ultramusic, perfectly silent music that is indifferent to any particular expression... music heard in reality would be more a disturbance than a real means of expression.” Consequently, we cannot understand the artistic process to be engaged with some metaphysical understanding: if it were, it would only be a perversion of that intelligible idea stripped down into the perceptible. The same idea can be applied to painting. If the painter is tasked with showing us something that exists beyond perception, he can only make an approximation of that thing, making it visually perceptible at the cost of its intelligibility.

There is then something else we need to consider and that is the interaction of the artist with the materials at their disposal. From Diderot we understand art to be concerned with action; with Jankélévitch we understand that something like music cannot be expressive in the way we want to see it. Diderot wants the subject crafted to express agency—not in a manner that is communicative but one that captures the whole of a type of being. In essence, when one goes to paint a subject, one needs to represent that subject in such a manner that the physical toll of the subject’s life becomes apparent. The physical expression of the subject is the image of what it is to be that subject. Above all, Diderot stresses a sense of the actual, making the image into something as real as it is capable of being: to have a model pose is bad art. To depict the real is good art. But with something like music, a form of art that lacks a particular subject, and more specifically the capacity to depict, how can one engage the real?

By Diderot’s account, good art is accurate depiction of a mode of life, perhaps even as much as the proper physiognomic depictions of a being. These traits, he wants to suggest, are shaped by a ‘doing,’ the actions one repeats over the course of a life.⁶ This is where we obtained our earlier idea of art existing in the doing; but how might we go on to establish that principle beyond a conjecture? Diderot’s emphasis on the entirety of agency being a factor in the artistic process is made problematic by something like music, which as Jankélévitch explains, lacks the same kind of expression as we come to expect from visual art.

What Jankélévitch stresses (and Diderot does not explore), is the connection of artist and process. One must “...recognize the effect of the tool on the worker,”⁷ or else be stuck with this idea of metamusic that has been dumbed down so we might perceive it. Jankélévitch presses this issue (something artists will often call ‘conversing with the material’), reminding us that, “No cause is ever absolutely a cause, in the unilateral and unequivocal sense that Aristotle’s prime mover is purely moving. Or in the sense that the act is pure agency... every agent up to a certain point is acted upon.”⁸

This idea of agents being reciprocal to the material they utilize should not be ignored. Sound is restricted temporally; it lacks a permanent result. Even a recorded performance is only *one* performance, and what’s more a recording removes the music from its dialogue with the musician proper: the agent is stripped from his or her immediate relevance to the product. We no longer have a tool and a worker, only a result that is displayed in the same manner as the reproduction of a painting. This is the same as transcribed music: sounds exist only when they are made; they are actual only when they are something specific: no sound directly represents another sound. There is no musical equivalent of the sound of rain, but there is the sound of rain.⁹ Painting, sculpture, and other visual arts have a different set of restrictions because they do not contain temporal ones. Jankélévitch remarks, “In a human being, a perpetual smile would become a horrifying grimace. By ‘eternalizing’ a present instant, art accomplishes the miracle of a smile that is always smiling, like the one hovering on the lips of the Mona Lisa.”¹⁰ A single painting has longevity. A single concert does not.

By Jankélévitch, we draw the conclusion that music is a product of interaction—the lack of a pure cause or effect is our grounds for stating that the interaction of instrument and musician is the basis of musical art. Even John Cage’s *4’33”* follows this requirement: it is a musical arrangement written to be performed by a group. The lack of interaction is, in our new set of considerations, the point: the removal of the agency of the musician. The composition makes the musician explicitly an agent who is not given a way to interact with his tool. This differs from the depictive issue, but in a way that is seemingly a commentary: writing rests on every page is an abstraction of music in the way that Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* are an abstraction of painting.¹¹

Jankélévitch brings us to an idea of the agent in music with the statement, “Singing is the immediate and unpremeditated expression of intention, of which it is at once expressive and constitutive.”¹² We can rephrase this as the direct expression of agency: one does not sing without meaning to. Singing is the agent as a cause and effect of oneself. Jankélévitch discusses this issue as one of a musical impressionism, “...which is sensory but objective.”¹³ This objectivity is the rise of actual sounds, such as “Stravinsky’s nightingale [who] is a real nightingale that sings a real nightingale song... not some more or less humanized and stylized vocalization.”¹⁴ This exists in contrast to “...musical noise, harmonized noises that imply human presence.”¹⁵ The musical is the human figure in a landscape of noise; the capacity to express something

uniquely human from the sounds available is much the same as creating paint to show a subject. One intends to create music the same way one intends to place figures in a painting.

This sort of insertion of subject into the musical canvas contains in it the same sort of ideas that Diderot calls on, a necessary full expression of the agency of the subject. The ‘subject’ in music appears rather abstract, but as we consider the singer bringing through the human element, we are forced to ask just which human, and knowing that music emerges from intention we have some terms to explore. One does not sing without meaning to; one does not create the human melody without purpose, but knowing that one cannot express in music the way expressive images can, what human side comes through in music with the human element? We have an intentional action—and to have an intentional action demands an agent to intend. Thusly, we have a concrete human whom *explicitly takes part in the materials at hand*—not solely manipulating, as we would like to think of our artistic endeavors, but also, as Jankélévitch might suggest, being made use of by song.

Both Diderot and Jankélévitch are ultimately trying to describe what ‘good art’ accomplishes, and each arrives at a conclusion indicative of human agency in their thoughts about expression. Moreover, Diderot’s complete agency and Jankélévitch’s intention and reciprocation with material supply a kind of standard for the art object and the act of creation, respectively. Perhaps most significantly, each thinker seems unconcerned with a sort of long-form metaphysical approach to art and music in favor of an appreciation for immediacy. For Diderot, there is the immediacy of the real subject, of the strong expression in painting: “An expression is weak or false if it allows for doubt as to the feeling behind it.”¹⁶ Having to dig out meaning that is not contained within the subject with great clarity is a shortcoming—but the possibility to accomplish such a thing is contained within the nature painting. Painting, as discussed, has no regard for a temporal limit, instead existing specifically in space. Music, on the other hand, exists within a finite duration and for that reason, “Meaning in music, for the composer, crops up as the music is being written; for the performer and listener, it is manifested during the performance.”¹⁷

The importance of agency remains in each sentiment, more simplistically in the context of Diderot since he is referencing the subject directly as an agent, but in a very important way for Jankélévitch: this ‘meaning’ (which is simply a quality we consider art capable of assuming, it may remain devoid of any specific definition) engages us as a coming-to-be within the active process of composition and performance in separate ways. His distinction is between composer, performer, and listener, but his definition specifies performer and listener as experiencing this quality of ‘meaning’ in the same way: by engaging the performance and experiencing “...the narrow interaction between meaning and act.”¹⁸ Agency is directly manifest only in the progressive, when one is playing, performing, doing. Since we are connected to this ‘feeling’ of Diderot’s good

art through agency, it follows that music carries its highest value when performed. A recording would then serve the same purpose as a reproduction of a painting, becoming solely a depiction of a feeling, rather than connecting with meaning: removed from a connection to agency, music lacks anything resembling ‘good’ expression.

There is a conclusion as to just how art can fail, that is when it is removed from agency, the doing—when art is not in touch with actual substance, it is poorly realized. A depiction is bad; a deep connection to the real succeeds. Music that is being played, the end result of the doing in painting, when art has a real feeling, it is ‘good.’ Diderot’s and Jankélévitch’s ideas of what good art contains are reconcilable: good art is expressive of agency and doing. This extends to the subjects of a painting, the painter, and in the case of music, the actual playing, since music is less concerned with a result of action. ‘Doing’ is the natural state of being for an agent, and thusly the good artist deals with doing, in all its forms, as an artistic question.

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¹ Diderot, Denis. “Notes on Painting.” *Diderot on Art Volume I*. Ed. John Goodman. Yale University Press: New Haven, Connecticut. 1995. 210

² Ibid, 195

³ Ibid, 212

⁴ Diderot does make clear that acting (clearly a similar venture to modeling) is not necessarily a failed venture, stating that, “The actor who is not conversant with painting is a bad actor.” An actor who familiarizes himself with what good painting gives to real subject prepares to create a real depiction of that subject.

⁵ Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *Music and the Ineffable*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey. 2003. 26-27

⁶ Diderot, Denis. “Notes on Painting.” *Diderot on Art, Volume I*. Ed. John Goodman. Yale University Press: New Haven, Connecticut. 1995. 212-213

⁷ Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *Music and the Ineffable*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey. 2003. 27

⁸ Ibid, 27

⁹ To compare, consider the role of a skull in a still life, a nearly universal symbol for death. That there are sounds associated with dying would be a reasonable proposition, but to say a singular musical note represents death would be absurd. There is not a standard critical interpretation of A#.

¹⁰ Ibid, 43

¹¹ Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* consists of four enormous white canvases, which he displayed lit in such a way that the shadows of the gallery patrons would be cast across them. He commented at one point, "They are not mine. Today is their creator," a sentiment in accord with Cage's project, where the noises about the concert venue become the piece at that particular performance.

¹² Ibid, 29

¹³ Ibid, 30

¹⁴ Ibid, 33

¹⁵ Ibid, 35

¹⁶ Diderot, Denis. "Notes on Painting." *Diderot on Art, Volume I*. Ed. John Goodman. Yale University Press: New Haven, Connecticut. 1995. 211

¹⁷ Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *Music and the Ineffable*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey. 2003. 29

¹⁸ Ibid.