

Introduction

The first task of this book is to develop a theory of art. The second is to take that theory out into the world and see whether and how it can transform ordinary human experience. Now transforming ordinary experience might seem to be an odd thing to expect from a theory of art. It seems that art is the sort of stuff we find precisely in extraordinary moments and extraordinary places, in art museums, concert halls, poetry books, theaters, and so forth: places which are marked off as zones of the unusual and the exalted. One way of taking a theory of art and letting it transform ordinary experience, then, would be to start looking at the world in the way we look at things in museums: "aesthetically," at a distance, and with veneration. That is not what this book is about. I am much more interested in how ordinary experience might transform our way of looking at things in museums, might show us how to get more passionate, more engaged, more immersed.

It is, finally, immersion that this book is about: immersion in the world. Art in the true sense, I believe, is a way of becoming fully present in the real, a way for people to experience oneness with things and with one another. What makes certain activities arts and what makes certain things works of art, according to the theory developed in the first part of this book, is the capacity of these activities and things to absorb us. And I am using "absorb" here quite literally: what makes these things art is our capacity to merge or achieve fusion with them and their capacity for, their openness to, that fusion. Art is thus something that calls us both into and out of ourselves and into what is real. Art is the characteristically human way of being in and loving the world. That is what I mean by "the art

↑
Love
World

of living": the process of becoming absorbed into living, of becoming present in one's life.

All of this is to say that art has a spiritual dimension. I do not mean by this that art appeals to us as disembodied spirits; I don't believe in disembodied spirits. I don't mean that art calls us to a higher realm than the physical; I don't think there is any such realm. I mean, rather, that art is human experience at its greatest intensity and its greatest depth. Art is how and what we are in reality; it is what we make of ourselves and our world, or perhaps what our world allows us to make of it. Art, finally, is a way of opening us to, a way of accepting, a way, even, of ecstatically affirming the world in which we abide and the people we are.

This might sound as though art is extraordinary, the creation of the genius, the enlightened soul, the guru. But art is at its most authentic in the most modest and typical forms of human making. Craft, labor, play: such activities, which most people engage in daily, are the truest arts of our culture. My idea is that our enlightenment is to be found precisely where we already are; the idea is not to become artists or appreciators of art, but to realize that we are already artists and appreciators of art. When we are listening to popular music on the radio on the way home from work, we are listening to art that is more typical of and more organically connected to our culture than anything in any museum. When we enjoy a well-designed and written advertisement, when we watch a baseball game on television, when we raise our children with devoted care, when we work with absorption in our gardens, we are authentically experiencing art.

If we could bring this artistry into our awareness, our experience would be transformed. We would continue, perhaps, to perform the very same activities that we are now performing, though we might perform them with an intensified mindfulness. We would not necessarily change anything about the external facts of how we are living. But our appreciation of those facts would be deepened, our commitment to living would be refreshed, our spiritual lives would be ani-

mated. We would be "brought to life," brought more fully into the lives we are already living.

In the context of the recent history of Western philosophy of art, such claims sound, to say the least, eccentric. But the roots of this approach in Western tradition and in world traditions run very deep. In addition, a movement is afoot that seeks to free Western aesthetics from its constriction. The works of Arnold Berleant, Ben-Ami Scharfstein, Richard Shusterman, Mara Miller, John McDermott, David Novitz, and Tom Alexander represent, in various ways, an opening of art to life. Most cultures do not distinguish art from craft or from spiritual devotion. Indeed, Western culture did not draw these distinctions until perhaps three hundred years ago. We might interpret this to mean that those cultures, and previous Western culture, simply have or had no art. Or we might interpret it to mean that *we* have much more art than we thought we did. I will mount a case for the latter approach on conceptual grounds, but let me tell you why I really prefer it: it makes our culture and ourselves available to us in a richer, more appreciable way. It gives us a sense of wonder at and gratitude for our own experience and the lives we make together.

Great art has been connected to every great spiritual tradition, because art is always a crystallized devotion to a world in process. The deepest spiritual experiences of many peoples have been, or have been entwined with, the making and using of works of art, or with engagement in absorbing process. This book discusses art in relation to several of the world's great spiritual traditions, including Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, and several Native American, African, and African-American traditions. Each of these is used, however, not to explain the art of the culture in question, but essentially to bring us to an awareness of the artistic aspects of ordinary Western experience. What is common to the elements of these traditions that I will discuss is a renewal of the real and a sensitivity to the present moment that yields a heightened celebration of life as we live it.

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 formulates and defends a notion of art that seeks to bring art out of the

museum and into our everyday experience. This theory describes art as devotion to process and enhancement of experience. The presentation deals somewhat technically with objections, and I ask the reader to bear with me. Chapter 2 develops this notion through the Zen concept of mindfulness and the realization in the Japanese tea ceremony of the transformation of ordinary experience into art. Chapter 3 relates the theory of art developed in the first chapter to the fundamental posture toward life recommended by the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, one of the central texts of Hinduism. This gives the theory its greatest capacity; here "art" becomes simply the way of acting that possesses the most presence and authenticity: the way of life that is consecrated or sacred.

The second part of the book is devoted to directing our attention to neglected or reviled parts of our own culture, which turn out, on reflection, to be our truest art and our truest hope. Chapter 4 discusses the future of the "fine arts" as these are understood within Western culture: the art of the museum and of the avant-garde. I hope that this future is pretty dim. Chapter 5 describes what, from my point of view, is the clearest illustration of the thesis that there is art all around us already: popular music, and in particular blues and country. I suggest along the way that Confucius, if he were around today, would be a country fan. Chapter 6 discusses the use of art as a source of and an example of knowledge, and as a transformative agent in education. Here I try to make more vivid and precise what I mean by such terms as 'absorption,' 'oneness,' and 'fusion.' Finally, Chapter 7 describes some of the problems that arise from the form of human making called technology. This chapter presents, through Taoism, a way of rethinking these problems so that we solve them by allowing them to be. More deeply, we solve these problems, and perhaps all real problems, by allowing ourselves and one another to be, and to be artists.

Part One

Opening the Concept of Art

Chapter 2

Zen and the The Art of Living

If the sort of view that I have just put forward is right, then art is a way of leading a meaningful life. Many of us have pursued a goal single-mindedly, only to find that, when it is achieved, we have a feeling of emptiness. One reason for this is that we focus exclusively on the goal and regard the means of achieving it merely as obstructions. It is thus possible to become miserable while realizing our most cherished desires. But if the process by which such desires are realized is itself absorbing, the time expended in their realization has not been wasted. I take seriously and literally the claim that a person's life may be a work of art, that there is an "art of living."

We might, taking the thing at its widest sweep, think of our entire lives as a single artistic process. I may have a goal in life, or I may not. Likely, I have several goals (I would like to be successful and authentic, say, as a philosopher and as a father, and so forth). But I cannot simply wish these goals to completion; they are the sort of goals that one must devote many years to achieving. Now it might be possible simply to try to rush through these years, simply to pass through them on the way to the goal, to experience them as an ordeal that must be endured for the sake of the goal. One odd thing, however, is that one is unlikely to achieve such goals if that is the way they are regarded. To become a good father: that is not something that I could, say, learn how to do by practicing, reading books,

undergoing therapy and so forth, and then suddenly, as it were momentarily, be a good father. To be a good father is precisely to be present in the process of fathering, to be present to one's children as father. There is an art of fathering, but not an achievable goal of being a good father that could be described outside of that art. If I want to be a good philosopher, to take another example, I cannot simply will flawless books into existence; I must nurture my work as best I can day by day as a teacher and as a learner. Again, that is not something I could do once and for all, but something to which I must devote myself inside the moment in which I am.

Too much of our activity is mechanical, is performed with little awareness and little appreciation for process. We of the west tend to order our lives as a series of tasks, and we tend to define those tasks by their goals. We make a list of things to do in the morning, and we are satisfied (if you want to call this satisfaction) if we complete the tasks on the list. The list does not include how we want to achieve these goals. I don't say, "go to grocery store in deep awareness and gratitude"; I just say "go to grocery store." But it has to be precisely in the mundane activities of our everyday lives that we come to awareness, if we come to awareness at all, because almost all of our lives consist of such activities. Very few of us have the luxury, or for that matter the inclination, to devote our lives to a spiritual path by, say, joining a monastery. But we do not need to be monks if we can dig our ditches, mow our lawns, shop for our groceries, or care for our children with devotion, with the feeling that these activities can be consecrated. Such activities may not yield works of art. But they can be experienced as artistic activities when they are experienced in devotion to process.

The practice of coming to awareness, or mindfulness, in the ordinary activities of life is central to Zen Buddhism. A Zen monk chops wood, cooks, cleans, and so forth not only to maintain himself and his fellows, but as a spiritual discipline. The Zen master Thich Nhat Han describes the process of washing the dishes as follows:

Scent of
Green Papaya

While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes. At first glance, that might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that's precisely the point. The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I'm being completely myself, following my breath, conscious of my presence, and conscious of my thoughts and actions. . . . If while washing dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance . . . we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. . . . If we can't wash the dishes, the chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future—and we are incapable of actually living one minute of life.¹

People often seek peace and enlightenment by intense spiritual discipline, or travelling to exotic places, or in fevers of penitence. The odd thing is that enlightenment is found exactly where we already are; enlightenment consists in opening up to and affirming the situation we are already in. All the shit that I have to do every day may seem to me to be the barrier to my peace; in truth, the things I do every day constitute the only place in which I could possibly find my peace. And if I am going to open myself to what I already have and what I already am and what I already do, if I am going to live artfully, then I had better start with the real things I do every day, things like washing the dishes. If I defer my peace until I meet my goals, I will find no peace when I get there. That is what Thich Nhat Han means when he says that if I am incapable of washing the dishes mindfully because I am looking forward to tea, I will not be able to drink my tea mindfully either. The art of living is, thus, an art of the most mundane, modest (and, thus, also truest) moments in our lives.

Tanigaki's
Jacket | Menstruation

Thomas Alexander, in his excellent discussion of Dewey's aesthetics, connects it with Zen. Central to Dewey's view, Alexander argues, is the notion of "living in the present as process."² He continues:

One is connected to the world in the living moment. To be so totally integrated in the moment is just what the Zen Buddhists call "enlightenment." It is simply "being-there"—that instant of complete awareness in which subject and object disappear, in which one doesn't so much see the Buddha as become him.

Thus, in Zen, mindfulness and devotion to process are connected with a fusion to the divine: one's fusion to a world in process, and to the things with which one works within that world is itself the content of religious devotion. This is a structure that I think is typical in the arts of the world, and to which I shall return in chapter 6: the fusion with materials that is the basis of art enables and is the occasion of wider fusions: with other persons, with and within a culture, and with the gods.

Tantrism, or Vajrayana, is another form of Buddhism (and, for that matter Hinduism), which affirms life in process, which calls us to an awareness of what we are already doing. The Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön defines Vajrayana as "the practice of taking the result as the path."³ This would mean, for example, taking *nirvāna* to be this world, or taking our current ignorance as complete enlightenment. Our ignorance would then consist in failing to realize that we were already enlightened. Pema Chödrön's teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, writes:

In tantra, it is necessary to have pride that we are taking a journey; it does not really matter whether it is a forward or a backward journey. A journey is actually taking place—that is what counts. . . . When we refer to a journey, it seems to be quite clear that we are not talking about struggle or ambition. On the other hand, maybe we *are* talking about struggle and ambition: ambition in the sense that we are inspired into the nowness, this very moment, and struggle in that a

sense of exertion or discipline in the practice is necessary.⁴

Art as a mode of living, in other words, demands real exertion and discipline, and real desire for goals. But it demands, above all, immersion in the journey itself: in some sense the path is itself the goal. *That we are on the way* is both the most obvious fact about us and the key to bringing ourselves into awareness of reality.

Art and craft is both a central metaphor and a central example of what it is to come to presence or mindfulness in one's life. As such, it is central to what I have been calling spirituality, and it is hardly surprising that artistic activities lie at the heart of all the world's spiritual traditions. As Carla Needleman says with regard to her life and craft:

I need to be where I am. When I'm not, when I'm lost somewhere out there, I am alienated from my life and all my thoughts and feelings take place in dreams—whether pleasant or unpleasant dreams doesn't matter. Simply put, if my life is to have meaning, I need to be alive inside my own skin. Craft is a way of working to be alive inside my skin.⁵

This has the trivial ring of the most profound truths. "I need to be where I am": the need to be where one is is a need that cannot but be satisfied; I always already am where I am; it is not as though I need to *get* someplace to be where I am already. But that is precisely the point. Art is a way of experiencing the truth, of coming into what is already the case. It is not reality that needs alteration, or on which we work through art; it is our own illusions.

II

I would now like to develop what I regard as a central illustration of the theory of art and of the art of living that I have been putting forward: the Japanese tea ceremony. The tea ceremony, as the name implies, is a ritual in which tea is con-

Subject
object



ignorance
→
enlightenment
brown
like

Barman

tea

sumed; it is a ritual way of preparing and drinking tea. Now drinking tea is part of everyday life; in fact, it's something most Japanese folks do most days. Raising such an activity to the realm of art thus has a particular resonance. People spend lifetimes learning and performing the tea ceremony. And this, I think, confirms what I am saying about art: it is a *way* of doing whatever it is you do: it is a *tao*, the *tao* of tea. Indeed, the tea ceremony is called in Japanese *chadō*: the *way* of tea. The tea ceremony raises life to the level of art by focusing on an everyday activity with tremendous concentration and performing it for its own sake. The tea ceremony seeks transcendence through immanence; it makes an art of life. And it is not surprising that it is bound up with Zen.

"Simply make fire, boil water, and drink tea," wrote Nambō Sōkei, a sixteenth-century tea master. "The tea ceremony is nothing other than that."⁶ And, stripped to the essentials, the tea ceremony is indeed just the everyday activity of tea. However, to emphasize the *art* in the ceremony, to encourage the participant to focus with intensity on the mundane activity, the classical tea ceremony is hedged around with incredibly detailed ritual prescriptions. These prescriptions govern the approaches to and arrangements within the tea room, the items used to prepare and serve tea, the order and character of the actions performed, and the content of conversation during the ceremony. Oddly enough, however (and this is connected with the origins of the tea ceremony in Zen, Taoism, and Confucianism), the tea ceremony is also supposed to have an absolutely spontaneous and even informal quality.

Now think about that for a moment. One is supposed to perform the ritually prescribed actions in the ritually prescribed way, and one is supposed to do so spontaneously. It immediately becomes apparent that that is a task which could absorb a whole life. And in fact many lives have been spent in the way of tea. One must cultivate the rituals so assiduously and at such a deep level that they become wholly internalized; when one asks oneself what one most wants to do *right now*, the answer has to be the particular ritually prescribed action of, say, turning the tea cup two quarter-turns. One performs

the action freely, easily, and naturally, and yet one performs it in an exactly specified manner.

Jorge Luis Borges, in a story that has entered the literature of aesthetics through the work of Arthur Danto, describes an author, Pierre Menard, who, in the early twentieth century, wrote part of *Don Quixote*. This was not a new version of *Don Quixote*, nor an adaptation of Cervantes. Rather it *was* Cervantes' *Quixote*, word for word. Nevertheless, despite its formal identity to Cervantes' work, Borges asserts that Menard's *Quixote* is stunningly different than the original. For example, he says, "the archaic style of Menard . . . suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his precursor, who handles easily the ordinary Spanish of his time."⁷ At any rate, it took Menard roughly a lifetime to complete a few chapters of his book. That was because he used a very interesting technique. In Menard's own words: "My solitary game is governed by two polar laws. The first permits me to attempt variants [on Cervantes] of a formal and psychological nature; the second obliges me to sacrifice them to the 'original' text and irrefutably to rationalize this annihilation" (p. 51). In other words, he had to come up with decisive reasons why *each word* of Cervantes has to be precisely what it is. That is, roughly, also the aesthetic structure of the tea ceremony; what is apparently a mechanical process has a subterranean existence as an immense act of simultaneous self-affirmation and self-annihilation. One sacrifices oneself to the ritual by an inexorable logic.

But the case of the tea ceremony is even harder than the case of Menard's *Quixote*. For after one sees that no variation could possibly count as an improvement, the proper actions now have to emerge spontaneously. It is as if Menard just found himself *wanting*, on his own, to set down the exact words of Cervantes. It is this that gives the tea ceremony a totally absorbing character; it is a very simple ceremony—minimalist in its aesthetic—but one that can be entered into at any level of depth of which the participant is capable. Of course, such simultaneous rigidity and spontaneity may be impossible, but that also helps make it worthy of pursuit. And this aspect of the tea ceremony is supposed to reverberate into

the entire experience of the tea master; since he is performing a mundane activity, he is learning to perform mundane activities in a beautiful, ritualized, and spontaneous way.

The tea room is in a sense set aside from the everyday. It is quiet, purified of business, its very size (typically four and a half mats, or nine feet square) ritually prescribed and set apart. But it is more accurate to describe the enclosure as synecdoche of the everyday. The everyday is brought into the tea room in a ritually prescribed way. The tea ceremony is *not* a perfection of the everyday world. In fact, as Kakuzo Okakura puts it in *The Book of Tea*, the tea ceremony "is essentially a worship of the imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life."⁸ The tea room is supposed to be scrupulously clean (this is, possibly, an element derived from Shinto rites of purification). Again, one might think of this as a way of distinguishing the tea room from everyday life, though it provides an opportunity to perform the mundane act of cleaning mindfully. But consider this story of the tea master Rikyū, retold by Okakura:

Rikyū was watching his son Sho-an as he swept and watered the garden path. "Not clean enough," said Rikyū, when Sho-an had finished his task, and bade him try again. After a weary hour the son turned to Rikyū: "Father, there is nothing more to be done. The steps have been washed for the third time, the stone lanterns and the trees are well sprinkled with water, moss and lichens are shining with a fresh verdure; not a twig, not a leaf have I left on the ground." "Young fool," chided the tea-master, "that is not the way a garden path should be swept." Saying this, Rikyū stepped into the garden, shook a tree and scattered over the garden gold and crimson leaves, scraps of the brocade of autumn! What Rikyū demanded was not cleanliness alone, but the beautiful and natural also. (pp. 36, 37)

Similarly, all trace of symmetry is avoided in the room itself and its accessories; one would rarely use a perfectly matched set of dishes, for example. In fact, the implements are often

wabi

selected to create an aesthetic of *wabi*, or poverty. Yasuhiko Murai describes that aesthetic as follows:

Rikyū's achievement represents the culmination of the *wabi* aesthetic born of the contemplative awareness of the relationship between people and things. While *chanoyu* [tea ceremony] necessarily involved the element of material things . . . the *wabi* ideal originated in the idea of negation or lack. In the first anthology of Japanese poetry, the eighth-century *Man'yō-shū*, *wabi* meant simply poverty or meanness.⁹

Murai describes the development of the notion into a positive aesthetic in the poetry of Saigyō (1118–90) and Shinkei (1406–74), among others, and then quotes a poem by Fujiwara Ietaka (115–1237), said to be one of Rikyū's favorites:

Show them who wait
Only for flowers
There in the mountain villages:
Grass peeks through the snow,
And with it, spring.

The beauty of *wabi* is the beauty of the everyday, not the exceptional. It is the beauty of the typical, of the things that go unnoticed until we learn to approach them mindfully. And the tea ceremony is precisely a context in which this mindfulness can be cultivated, in which the everyday is isolated, in its everydayness, for appreciation.

Often, rough and flawed pots and cups are employed, and many of these items are justly famous, not as perfect exemplars of the potter's art, but as perfect images of the imperfect in human life. Ueda retells a story of Rikyū:

One day Rikyū and Joo, another great sixteenth-century tea master under whom Rikyū himself studied tea as a youth, were invited to a tea ceremony together with a couple of others. On the way to the host's residence they saw a vase for sale. Joo liked it very much, but as he had company he said nothing at the time and sent for it the next morning. To his disappointment, he

flatlands

found the vase had already been sold. Then an invitation to tea came from Rikyū, who said he would like to show a vase he had just bought. Joo went, now realizing that Rikyū was the one who had beaten him to the vase. Indeed there the vase was, with two camellia flowers neatly arranged in it, but, strangely enough, one of ears of the vase had been broken off. While other guests sat wondering, Joo said to Rikyū: "It is strange that you have chipped an ear off that vase. From the moment I saw the vase yesterday, I have been fascinated by it and kept thinking that I would use it at my tea ceremony, but only after breaking off an ear. So, before I came here this morning I had planned to carry out a scheme. Thinking that it wouldn't be very interesting to chip off an ear after discussing the matter with you at the end of the ceremony, I had planned to break off an ear myself at the recess or some such time." So saying, Joo took out a hammer from his pocket. (91, 2)

The tea implements are imperfect precisely because the tea ceremony is not an attempt to escape or evade the imperfection of life through art, but an attempt to affirm life in all its imperfection. In "worshipping the imperfect" one learns to live artistically outside the tea room. Some of the implements designed and used by Rikyū are still extant. If one looks at such famous tea bowls as the "Great Black" or the "White Heron," for example, one sees that they are absolutely simple in design, and absolutely rough in execution. They possess the character of natural, unworked material; they are true to the world in the sense that they are true to the materials out of which they are constructed. And they are affirmations of the world in the sense that they are occasions for finding the greatest beauty in the simplest stuff of reality.¹⁰

In an alcove called the *tokonoma* within the tea room, there is usually a flower arrangement (along with a hanging scroll of calligraphy or representational painting). This flower arrangement, too, is often an affirmation of life in its imperfection,

rather than an idealization. One major school of flower arranging (which is, like the tea ceremony itself, an art form to which one can devote a lifetime) is the naturalistic school. One should not, on this view, employ flowers that are out of season, for example. In the winter, one might even display bare branches (a further expression of *wabi*). And one is to arrange the flowers and branches in a way compatible with the ways flowers and branches actually grow. For example, the branches should not extend below the level of the top of the vase, which represents the ground. Water may be scattered over the blossoms and the vase, giving the cooling quality of dew. And nature is brought into the tea ceremony in other ways: the tea room is often approached by a "garden path" through a naturalistic garden, as we have seen. And the temperature of the tea and the quantity served may be adjusted to the weather, in order to satisfy thirsty guests on a hot day, or warm them up on a cold one.

One feature that is immediately noticeable about the tea ceremony is that it integrates many arts. One approaches the tea room through a carefully landscaped garden. The tea room itself is often a masterpiece of simple architecture, and the carpenters who build them are often venerated. The tea room encloses the potter's wares, often decorated with sculptural details or lacquered. The kettle is sometimes filled with iron pieces to create a jingling music. Flower arranging and painting or calligraphy are often incorporated. The ritually prescribed movements have the character of a dance, and the ritually prescribed speeches (inquiring about the origin of the implements, for example) the character of drama. This very integration intensifies the aesthetic experience: it is the creation of a total environment that is meant to be completely absorbing. The circumstances are designed to create an aesthetic situation, not of distance or disinterest, but of engagement. (Arnold Berleant has argued eloquently that that is a feature of the experience of the truest art.¹¹) What one does in the tea room one does for its own sake, and for the sake of giving everyday life an aesthetic character.

Berleant

It is often asked whether we should think of the tea ceremony as a religious rite, a social occasion, or a work of art. The ceremony indeed derives from ceremonies performed in Zen monasteries, and, as I have said, also displays Taoist, Shinto, and Confucian elements. (The very respect for tradition that it incorporates is a Confucian aspect, bordering on ancestor-worship.) And the tea ceremony is beyond doubt a social occasion. Among other things, it has the effect of breaking down the social barriers within a hierarchical society. All of the guests typically enter through a low door, so they are all equally forced to bow upon entering. One is not supposed to talk politics. Instead, one talks freely and spontaneously (in the ritually prescribed manner!) about the utensils, the weather, and so forth. The participants are to be treated as equals, and though one guest is typically singled out as honored, this is not always the one of the highest social standing, and those of higher social standing must still pay their respects. And the tea ceremony, as we have seen, is obviously a multimedia artistic extravaganza (albeit a minimalist one). So which is it?

Fortunately, the present theory of art allows us to give no answer to this question, whereas several of the traditional Western theories might force us to. The tea ceremony has social and religious purposes, social and religious content. But that is obviously not incompatible with it being a work of art. Whatever the purposes for which the tea ceremony is performed, it is also performed for its own sake; it is elaborately designed to be intrinsically absorbing: all of its elements conspire to that effect. So on my view it is a paradigm of art. And since it is precisely an art of life, an art of eating and drinking and talking and loving nature and other human beings, it encapsulates the basic point of this book: that between life and art no decision is necessary, that we can live our art, that life and art are intimately connected and at their best moments identical.

I would like to conclude this chapter by quoting a passage from Okakura which I think is, roughly, the most profound thing I have ever read:

The Taoists relate that at the great beginning of No-Beginning, Spirit and Matter met in mortal combat. At last the Yellow Emperor, the Son of Heaven, triumphed over Shuhyung, the demon of darkness and earth. The Titan, in his death agony, struck his head against the solar vault and shivered the blue dome of jade into fragments. The stars lost their nests, the moon wandered aimlessly among the wild chasms of the night. In despair the Yellow Emperor sought far and wide for the repairer of the Heavens. He had not to search in vain. Out of the Eastern sea rose a queen, the divine Niuka, horn-crowned and dragon-tailed, resplendent in her armour of fire. She welded the five-coloured rainbow in her magic cauldron and rebuilt the Chinese sky. But it is also told that Niuka forgot to fill two tiny crevices in the blue firmament. Thus began the dualism of love—two souls rolling through space and never at rest until they join together to complete the universe. Everyone has to build anew his sky of hope and peace.

The heaven of modern humanity is indeed shattered in the Cyclopean struggle for wealth and power. The world is groping in the shadow of egotism and vulgarity. Knowledge is bought through a bad conscience, benevolence practiced for the sake of utility. The East and West, like two dragons tossed in a sea of ferment, in vain strive to regain the jewel of life. We need a Niuka again to repair the grand devastation; we await the great Avatar. Meanwhile, let us have a sip of tea. (8,9)

Yes, let's. Art brings with it the potential of social and cosmological transformation. But it is a transformation that renounces the effort for transformation; it is a transformation achieved here and now by focusing on what we are now doing, not as a means of transformation, or not only as such a means, but also for its own sake. Kierkegaard once said that the most difficult task is "to strive to become what one already is." He asks: "who would take the pains to waste his time on such a task, involving the

Social Transformation ★

greatest imaginable degree of resignation? Quite so. But for this very reason alone it is a very difficult task, the most difficult of all tasks in fact, precisely because every human being has a strong natural bent and passion to become something more and different."¹² Art is a means of focusing on what we already are, and thus transforming ourselves. It is a way of appreciating what we already have, becoming absorbed into what is already there. The tea ceremony encapsulates this process.

Notes

1. Thich Nhat Han, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 3–5.
2. Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 195.
3. Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), 9n.
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Chapter 3

Art and War: Paradox of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*

The "art of living" in the sense developed above is the central theme of the great classic of Hinduism: the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. The first several chapters of the *Gītā* set themselves a daunting task: to explain how a life of action can be rendered compatible with a life of renunciation of desire. The situation, in fact, is designed to raise the issue in an excruciatingly intense form. At the climax of the epic known as the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa—an incarnation of the Supreme Lord—and Arjuna—the war leader of the heroic Pāṇḍavas—pause on the verge of the decisive battle. Arjuna asks how killing his enemies, who include his own teachers and members of his family, in order to secure power and fame, can be squared with his religious and ethical convictions. In this chapter I will try to explicate Kṛṣṇa's solution of the paradox, not from the point of view of Hindu tradition (in which it has driven whole movements of thought), but from the point of view of the notion of the art of living as it has been developed so far. I will wind up arguing that the paradox of the *Gītā* suggests a reconstrual of the way we conceive the relation of means and ends in our activities, a reconstrual that can be profitably understood through the concept of art. And I will argue that this reconstrual has the potential to change our relations to our world and to one another in a way that is deeply life-affirming.

I

Let us begin by setting the familiar scene. The battle between the massive armies of the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, who are