Artistic, Propositional, and Societal Truth: Response to Michael Kelly

Lambert Zuidervaart (May 17, 2013)

Michael Kelly’s provocative paper asks about relationships among art, justice, and truth. If I understand him correctly, he wants to argue that art—at least some kinds of art—can contribute to the pursuit of social justice, but art does not need artistic truth in order to do so. It is not clear to me whether Kelly thinks art needs some other kind of truth in order to contribute to the pursuit of social justice, but perhaps he does. What he suggests in conclusion is that just art should be truly just and truly art, but here “truly” could simply mean “really” or actually” rather than “truly” in the sense of being substantially true.

Using my own vocabulary, I would rephrase Kelly’s important questions like this. Does art need to be imaginatively disclosive in an imaginatively cogent way in order to contribute to the pursuit of social justice? Can art that is not imaginatively disclosive in an imaginatively cogent way contribute to the pursuit of social justice? And must art that is either imaginatively non-disclosive or disclosive but non-imaginative contribute to social injustice?

Intuitively, I want to respond as follows: The imaginatively disclosive and cogent character of an art product or art practice is not a guarantee that it will contribute to the pursuit of social justice. There is no hard link between artistic truth and social justice. At the same time, however, the failure of art to be imaginatively disclosive and cogent is more likely to contribute to social injustice than its opposite. For both artistic lack of truth and artistic falsity tend to insulate us from the demands of justice and to make us comfortable with an unjust status quo. So, although there is no hard link between artistic truth and social justice, artistic truth is an important enabling condition for the pursuit of social justice.
Kelly, however, worries that any talk of artistic truth or of truth in art will do an injustice to art and will distract us from art’s legitimate political roles in society. As he puts it in the introduction to his paper, historically “art has almost always suffered politically as well as ontologically when it has been conceived in relation to truth.”

Although I am not sure about this historical claim, I share Kelly’s worry. That is precisely why I have tried to articulate a notion of artistic truth that is appropriate to art, including contemporary art. For example, I do not think recent emphases on social construction, context, and contingency “challenge contemporary art,” as Kelly mistakenly suggests. Rather, they help characterize contemporary art. And, as such, they challenge traditional notions of truth, including Adorno’s modernist notion of artistic truth, such that philosophical attempts to rearticulate a notion of artistic truth must be compatible with these emphases. That is what my book *Artistic Truth* tries to do.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that I do not regard artistic truth as the only kind of truth or as the supreme kind of truth or as, on Kelly’s interpretation of Heidegger, the truth about truth. Artistic truth is one kind of truth, an important kind, to be sure, but only one. Another kind is what we can call propositional truth. It is not clear whether Kelly acknowledges the force of this distinction. Perhaps he has propositional truth in mind when he says art has suffered when conceived in relation to truth or when he says artistic truth “may only be a barrier” to “art’s attempts to achieve its ends, political and otherwise.” I cannot tell for sure, because Kelly does not say what he means by “truth.”

Kelly is right to mention my partial indebtedness to Heidegger, but he misdescribes that debt. Like Kelly, I am critical of Heidegger’s anti-aesthetic stance and its political implications.

---

1 Michael Kelly, “‘True Just Art,’” 1.
2 Kelly, 12.
3 Kelly, 10-11.
4 Kelly, 13-14.
Moreover, I reject Heidegger’s move in “The Origin of the Work of Art” to make all truth artistic. Instead, what I critically appropriate from Heidegger—the Heidegger of *Being and Time*—is a conception of truth in general that includes both propositional truth and artistic truth and does not reduce truth in general to either propositional or artistic truth. Further, Heidegger points toward a conception of propositional truth that avoids the pitfalls of a correspondence theory of truth traceable back to Plato and Aristotle but does not embrace the most prominent alternatives available, such as a coherence theory, a pragmatic theory, or more recent deflationary accounts of truth. Let me explain.

An important insight in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is that at bottom propositional truth is a matter of disclosure. When one makes an assertion—when I assert, “The hammer is too heavy,” to use Heidegger’s example—what makes the asserted proposition true is not simply that it corresponds to a fact—to the fact that the hammer is heavy, in this case. Nor does the proposition’s truth simply derive from how well it coheres with other propositions that one asserts: This is a hammer, Hammers are useful for hammering nails, To set nails in finish carpentry one needs a light hammer, etc. Nor, again, does the proposition’s truth simply result from how well one’s assertion works in practice—for example, by helping one find the right tool to build a cabinet. Neither a correspondence theory of truth nor a coherence theory nor a pragmatic theory adequately explains the truth of a proposition. Instead, the truth of a proposition stems from how it opens something for our understanding. Propositional truth has to do first of all with the quality of the insights our assertions articulate. Moreover, the quality of these insights depends both on the quality of our understanding and on how the matters about which we make assertions offer themselves to us in relation to other matters.
Something is missing in Heidegger’s account of propositional truth, however. For truth is not simply a matter of insight. It also is a matter of validity. When we assess the truth of a proposition, it is not enough to say that the proposition is insightful. We also want to say that it is logically valid. We want to say it holds up in relation to other propositions, such that if someone challenges an assertion, we can give a logically valid argument in favor of the proposition asserted. When we do this, we appeal to a principle of logical validity, as indicated in traditional logic by the rules of excluded middle, non-contradiction, and modus ponens. On my own account, propositional truth involves a dynamic correlation between the propositional disclosure of insight and the principle of logical validity.

Yet I do not equate truth in general with propositional truth. Artistic truth, for example, is primarily nonpropositional. What characterizes truth as a whole is a dynamic correlation between validity in general and disclosure in general. More precisely, truth in its most comprehensive sense is a dynamic correlation between two poles: between human fidelity to societal principles, on the one hand, and a life-giving disclosure of society, on the other. By “life-giving” I mean a process in which human beings and other creatures come to flourish in their interconnections. The societal principles to which we need to be faithful include logical validity, and life-giving disclosure includes propositional disclosure. But there are other principles too, such as the principle of justice, and there are other dimensions to human flourishing than propositional disclosure. The challenge for a general conception of truth is to understand how logical validity and propositional disclosure relate to these other principles and other dimensions of disclosure, as well as how aesthetic validity and imaginative disclosure relate to all of these matters. None of the most prominent theories of truth—correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, deflationary—does
justice to the truth character of propositions, it seems to me, nor do they hold much promise for understanding the truth character of artistic products and practices.

Do artistic products and practices indeed have a truth character? Kelly seems to deny that they do, although he couches this denial in two pragmatic claims about the concept of artistic truth: first, that we do not need this concept to make sense of art in its societal context and, second, that such a concept would restrict “the potential of art to contribute to justice.”5 Let me first take up the need for a concept of artistic truth to make sense of art. Then I will consider whether my specific concept of artistic truth restricts art’s political potential.

My underlying intuition about art in relation to truth is that art is a fundamental way in which we come to know others, ourselves, and the world we inhabit. This is not an idiosyncratic intuition. In one way or another, it is shared by Plato and Aristotle, by Hegel and Schelling, by Collingwood and Dewey, and by Heidegger and Adorno. These philosophers have different vocabularies for formulating their shared intuition, and they have differing stances on the legitimacy and significance of art as a way of acquiring and having knowledge, but there is a common thread here in the Western philosophical tradition, and not only in the Western philosophical tradition. One can find a similar intuition at work in the practices and self-descriptions of artists, art audiences, and art commentators and critics. To cite just one recent example, Roger Cohen, in an op-ed published by The New York Times, defends the controversial movie Zero Dark Thirty against charges that it “distorts the facts” by claiming “truth is art’s highest calling. For it the facts must sometimes be adjusted. ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ meets the demands of truth.”6

5 Kelly, 19.
What kind of knowledge do we acquire through the making and interpreting of art? If it is indeed knowledge, and not simply a knowledge look-alike, shouldn’t we be able to tell when it is better or worse? Would it not make sense to attribute truth or falsity to the knowledge art helps us acquire and to the ways in which art does this? My answer has been to say that making and interpreting art do indeed give us knowledge of others, the world, and ourselves, and it challenges and changes knowledge we already have. The most important way in which the arts do this is by allowing us to engage imaginatively with ourselves and with others and with the world we inhabit and, in this process, to acquire and have imaginative insights. When such imaginative disclosure occurs in an imaginatively cogent way—in a way that has aesthetic validity—then the knowledge afforded by art is true—artistically true, not necessarily propositionally true—but true nonetheless. More specifically, I have suggested that this process occurs in three relations— in the relations between art maker and art product, between art public and art product, and within the work of art itself. It is the entire complex of these relations and how they enable people to share and test insights that deserves the label “artistic truth.”

Kelly does not seem to deny that these relations exist or that they are important in art. He does not mind talking about authenticity, significance, and integrity. He simply does not want to link these with truth. Yet I find it difficult to divorce these terms from the concept of truth, since what I mean by “authenticity,” “significance,” and “integrity” just is the way in which art affords us with imaginative knowledge—knowledge that, if it is worthwhile, will be true, although not intrinsically propositional.

Unless one thinks all knowledge must be propositional or, even more stringently, that it must be scientific, or that only propositional or scientific knowledge can be true, I do not see any systematic reason to avoid the concept of artistic truth. On the contrary, I think there are good systematic reasons to propose and use it. Pragmatically, this has the added benefit that it challenges a philosophical tradition whose accounts of knowledge and truth have contributed to the triumph of instrumental reason and the marginalization of the arts in Western society—along with the growth of many irrationalist and fundamentalist reactions to instrumentalism.

For me, this Adornian worry about the triumph of instrumental reason also must inform one’s reflections about the potential of art to contribute to the pursuit of social justice. Even though I have taken issue with Adorno’s specific conception of artistic truth and the view of art’s autonomy that sustains his conception, I think he is right to regard art as a way to resist instrumentalism. I take this up in Art in Public when I discuss “systemic pressures that threaten the existence and flourishing of arts organizations in the civic sector,” specifically the pressures of hypercommercialization, performance fetishism, and the logic of technological innovation. My conception of artistic truth is intended to support an argument that art practices and products are not simply hyper-commodities, not simply administrative outcomes, and not simply technological sensations. Rather, supported by democratic arts organizations within a social economy and a vibrant public sphere, art practices and products can help people sort out their lives and to be or to become agents of social change. To do this, I argue, such practices and products need to be imaginatively disclosive and cogent—i.e., they need to be artistically true.

For this argument to go through, however, one needs a vision of social justice. What do we expect when we ask whether art can contribute to the pursuit of social justice? Certainly part

7 Zuidervaart, Art in Public, 171.
of the answer would be that we expect art to help individuals and groups resist conditions of oppression and achieve liberation. These conditions include economic and political systems that regularly work to the advantage of the wealthy and powerful and to the disadvantage of everyone else and to the destruction of nonhuman life, as the entire tradition of critical theory has held. Hence our question also pertains to how art can help challenge and transform the capitalist economy and the administrative state. I have made suggestions along these lines in *Art in Public*, where I call for the “differential transformation” of society as a whole, and where I indicate how arts organizations—and artists and their publics—can contribute to this process.

Yet it would be a mistake, it seems to me, to treat art as no more than an instrument of social change. In fact that would surrender art to the sort of instrumentalization Adorno so adamantly opposed. Art needs to contribute what it is most suited to offer in a differentiated society. At the heart of this contribution, or so I have argued, lies an imaginatively cogent disclosure of insights into others, ourselves, and the world. In other words, art needs to offer artistic truth if it would contribute to the pursuit of social justice.

That brings us back to where I began. Does art need to be artistically true in order to contribute to the pursuit of social justice? My answer is yes. To help individuals and groups pursue liberation from oppressive conditions, and to help transform the systems that frame these conditions, art needs to be authentic and significant, and artworks need to attain internal integrity. Achieving such artistic truth does not guarantee that art will contribute to the pursuit of social justice. The absence of artistic truth, however, or the deliberate pursuit of artistic falsity—the pursuit of inauthenticity, insignificance, and a lack of integrity—would very likely undermine attempts to achieve social justice.
Adorno put his own answer to Kelly’s questions like this: “No artwork … can be socially true that is not also true in-itself; conversely social false consciousness is equally incapable of becoming aesthetically authentic. … That whereby the truth content of artworks points beyond their aesthetic complexion, which it does only by virtue of that aesthetic complexion, assures it its social significance.”¹⁰ That’s not quite right, for reasons I lay out in my various books. Yet it provides an important counterweight to anyone who, in the name of social justice, would either instrumentalize art or deny its truth.