



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

Artists' Questions, Quaker Questions

In his [letter](#) on p. 4, Douglas Gwyn speaks of "self-referentiality" as a trap which leads to legalism, both in the Society of Friends and in the arts. I think he means that Quakers talk to other Quakers and artists talk to other artists; there is an in-group jargon and there are in-group rules, and the ability to play by those rules may come to take precedence over fidelity to the Muse/Inward Teacher.

As Quaker artists we may find ourselves trying to play by both sets of rules at once, judging our work by two different sets of criteria. Here I will call them "artists' questions" and "Quaker questions," and will treat them as more separate than they usually are.

In the more rarefied realms of the arts the criteria for judging excellence are questions like:

Does it advance the art form?

Does it build on the best of what has gone before in a way that addresses the questions artists are currently asking?

Does it set useful problems and provide useful solutions?

And most centrally:

How can I use this medium to say what I am meant to say, with power?

Quakers, on the other hand, tend to ask questions like:

Is it in accord with Friends testimonies—peace, simplicity, equality, community, respect for creation, truth?

Does it choose life?

Does it heal?

Does it subvert the domination system and further the reign of God?

Of course these two sets of criteria do intersect. There have always been many artists deeply concerned with the "Quaker questions." Quakers are notoriously less able to understand the relevance of the "artists' questions."

I find that *both* sets of questions yield helpful guidelines for judging my own art. Both serve to clarify my understanding of my call. I grow as an artist by letting myself be stretched by those greater than I. Struggling with the limits of my medium increases the power of my work. Being grounded in the testimonies helps me to avoid making art into an idol. The interplay of both sets illumines the eternal in our present situation, and strengthens my prophetic witness.

But either, wrongly used, may endanger my artistic integrity. My art must involve an intense *encounter* with the creative spirit. If I view these questions as standards external to the work and to the process, real encounter may not be possible. In the presence of mystery, of the numinous,

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the question "what good is this?" does not arise. My task is to encounter the creative spirit on the one hand and the limits of my medium on the other. If I can truly and fully do this, I can trust that the result will be good.

When I feel that I am struggling against alien pressures from both directions at once, the tension becomes unbearable. I am tempted to scrap one set of questions in favor of the other. But that way lies the trap of self-referentiality—and legalism.

So I must continue to hold both sets in creative tension, to let them inform and correct each other. To the extent that I can do this, I build bridges between art and faith, both for myself and for others.

What relevance do the "artists' questions" and the "Quaker questions" have to your work?

How does each undergird, sustain and inspire you? How do they inform and correct each other?

Do you experience conflicts between them?

Are you able to live in the tensions?

What are you doing to lift up the "artists' questions" for Quakers, and vice versa?

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