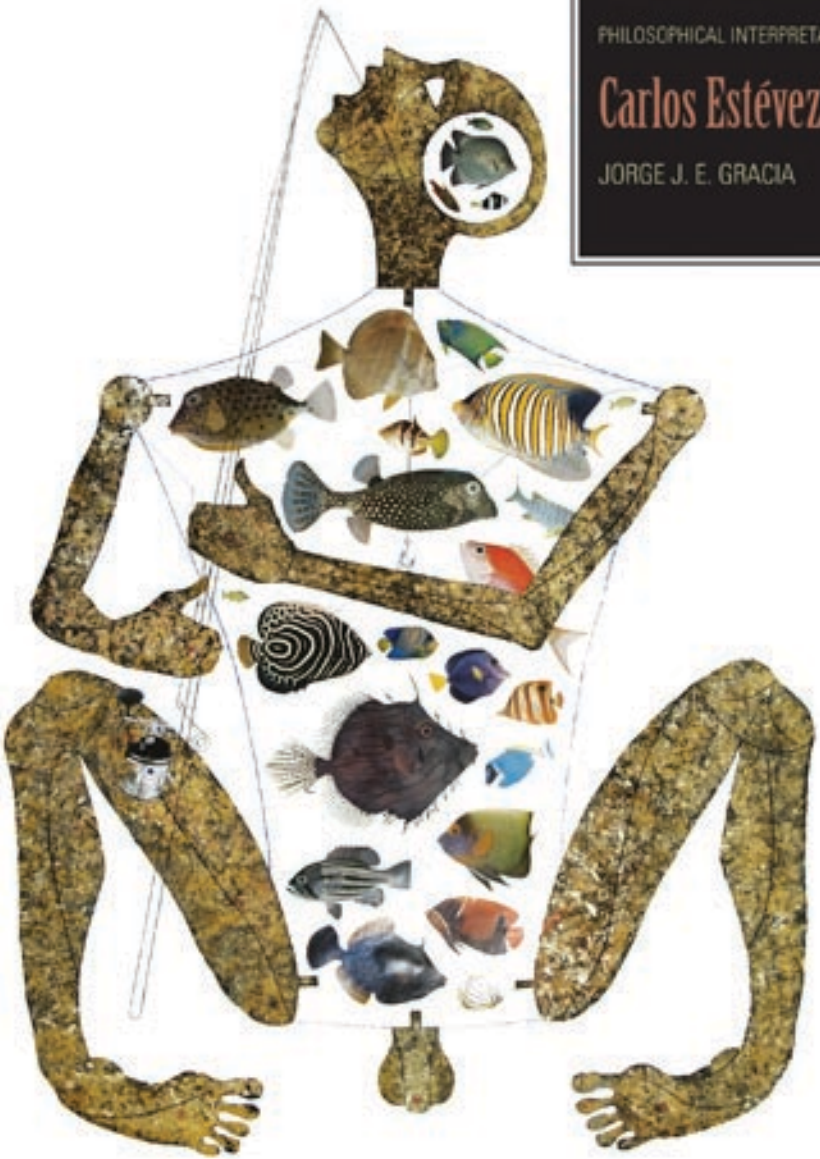
IMAGES of THOUGHT

PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF

Carlos Estévez's Art

JORGE J. E. GRACIA



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Images of Thought

SUNY series in Latin American and Iberian Thought and Culture

Jorge J. E. Gracia and Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal, editors

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Philosophical Interpretations of Carlos Estévez's Art

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Las Meninas is the visible image of Velásquez's invisible thought.

—René Magritte

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Preface

In 2001, I picked up a copy of Holly Block's recently published *Art Cuba: The New Generation.* I browsed through it, looking at the pictures and marveling at the imagination and creativity of recent Cuban artists. I still have the book, with pieces of paper sticking out marking those artists whose work I found more striking. Of the more than three dozen artists included, a dozen were particularly interesting, and one caught my special attention; I could hardly take my eyes away from the images of his art. His name is Carlos Estévez, at that time barely thirty, and represented with three works, all of them extraordinary. *Cité de l'existence* (The City of Existence, 1998) is a watercolor, pencil, and sanguine on paper of a standing, nude man, with legs and arms apart, whose body is covered with an urban landscape with points of emphasis on the heart, the back of the hands, the feet, the center of the face, and the penis. *El mundo del deseo* (The World of Desire, 1999) is also a watercolor, watercolor pencil, and sanguine on Kraft paper, of a moth with open, elaborately beautiful wings and a body suggesting an erect penis surrounded by the lines of a receptacle. *Mecánica natural* (Natural Mechanics, 1997) is a watercolor and pencil on paper of a chicken drawn inside the outlines of a sewing machine and its intricate inner workings.

Where did these images come from? They seemed so different from anything else I had seen. They were imaginative, subtle, and aesthetically pleasing, and they produced in me the feeling I get in the pit of my stomach when I intensely want something that I cannot have. The longing was bad, but Estévez's work was out of my reach. He was in Cuba, which posed enormous difficulties for getting in touch and purchasing and transporting the art. The political situation in Cuba and the United States was not conducive to this kind of process. More important still, I had started thinking about Cuban art in connection to my work on ethnicity. My interest stemmed not so much from a fascination with this particular art, for I am not parochially interested in Cuban art. But as a philosopher I had been working on issues of social identity, specially Hispanic/Latino identity, and this had led me to think that perhaps I could use the case of Cuban Americans to explore the philosophical questions that arise in the context of ethnicity—identity,

memory, diaspora, assimilation, discrimination, and acceptance, among many others. This in turn had led me to restrict my recent art collecting to Cuban American artists, so Estévez was completely out of the picture—since he lived in Cuba and was not Cuban American, I had to let him go, with pain. But the memory of his work stayed with me; the uniqueness of his art had made a lasting impression.

Then, in 2005, I was in Art Miami, strolling through the endless corridors filled with artworks, and I saw three pieces that immediately stood out as Estévez's work. One was clever and light, yet intriguing, a juggler of teacups; a second was a female puppet with iridescent wings, superimposed on a black background; and the third was a head full of numbers, moving among the clouds in a flying contraption. Estévez had been in Miami for six months!

I bought the flying head on the spot, and this opened the doors for me to talk to the artist and incorporate him into my web project "Cuban Art Outside Cuba: Identity, Philosophy, and Art" (http://www.philosophy.buffalo.edu/capenchair/CAOC/index.html). This led in turn to several conversations and exchanges and to the interview whose translation is included among the Appendices of this book. Eventually I realized the reasons Estévez's art had such a special attraction for me. His work is profoundly philosophical; almost every piece he produces has philosophical relevance and interest. It raises metaphysical and theological issues in particular, such as the nature of the world, free will and determinism, predestination, and the human condition. And after all, I am a philosopher and have been interested in metaphysics and theology from the beginning. Another aspect of the work intriguing to me is its archaism. Estévez's art is informed by a fascination with Renaissance, medieval, and early modern intellectual history and science. Some of it resembles the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, as well as the work of explorers, scientists, and inventors. His sources of inspiration are often old drawings, abstruse philosophical doctrines, and articles in centuries-old encyclopedias. In some ways, he is a Jorge Luis Borges of visual art. But this has to be balanced with a futuristic, science fiction strain that mixes humans, machines, and animals. As a philosopher, a medievalist, and an intellectual historian, could I resist such temptation? I surrendered. And in time it became clear that if I were going to explore the question of what philosophy has to do with art, it would be particularly appropriate to use Estévez's work as a point of departure. This book is the result.

The question of the relation between philosophy and art has been investigated from different perspectives, but my strategy here is to challenge the philosophical problem posed by this controversial relation in terms of visual art.[1] The problem affects every form of art, because art generally uses perceptual means to unfluence audiences. Even art forms that use language,

as is the case with poetry, conjure up visual images. So the relation of these images to philosophical thoughts and ideas arises. Can art incorporate philosophy? And can philosophy make something philosophical out of art? Or, put in another way, can artists effectively address philosophical issues and ideas in their art, and can philosophers provide legitimate philosophical interpretations of art? Or are art and philosophy diametrically opposed enterprises, in which communication is impossible? These questions are particularly relevant in the case of the work of an artist like Estévez, whose art is intended to be philosophical but takes the form of visual images.

I argue that this problem is founded on a misunderstanding of the natures of interpretation, art, and philosophy. The argument has two parts that correspond to the two parts of the book. The first presents various philosophical interpretations of the work of Carlos Estévez; the second is a theoretical analysis of the concepts at play in the notion of the philosophical interpretations of art. Both parts are essential. The first provides the material for the speculative discussion in the second part, and the second supplies a theoretical articulation necessary to satisfy the requirements of philosophical relevance for the first part. In conclusion, I claim that the relation between philosophy and art, even in the case of visual art, is not necessarily antithetical, and that the philosophical interpretation of art is not only possible but enlightening.

Still, the kind of interpretation applied to art cannot be all of the same sort. Art that is not concerned with philosophy can only successfully be interpreted philosophically in relational terms, whereas art that is philosophical can be successfully interpreted in nonrelational terms. The key to understanding philosophical interpretations of art is to keep in mind both the kind of philosophical interpretation in question and what the art is about.

The first part of the book consists of seventeen essays that examine various problems of perennial interest, and of particular concern in contemporary society, in the context of Estévez's work. They are presented as philosophical interpretations of particular pieces by this artist but also are intended to reveal and illustrate significant relations between philosophy and art. They anticipate, but do not reproduce, the points made in the second part of the book, avoiding redundance and leaving room for readers to move in whatever directions they wish. The essays are not of the same size or nature, and they differ depending on the topic explored, the particular artworks they address, and the philosophers used in them. The second part of the book is divided into three chapters that explore the nature of interpretation, art, and the philosophical interpretation of art and suggests solutions to some of the problems posed by the relation between philosophy and art.

The titles I have chosen for the interpretative essays are taken from well-known sayings. I have favored ancient and medieval authors, some

traditional sources such as the Bible, and thinkers with whom Estévez or I have some kinship. This artist's work has ties to late medieval and Renaissance traditions, as well as to the thought of some existentialist philosophers. As a member of the Cuban diaspora residing in Miami, Estévez also has been exposed to issues of ethnicity and race. My own preferences, which match his to a good extent, gravitate toward classical philosophy and its medieval interpreters and include contemporary existentialist thought and social philosophy dealing with identity, so I have tried to stay within the parameters relevant to the understanding of Estévez's work and to my own views and philosophical preferences. His work and my interpretations take off from what we know and like, as Ortega would say, from "our circumstances." At the end of each essay I have added a short list of sources used that might be of help to those interested in pursuing further the topics explored in the essays. In cases where there is a short text within a larger discussion that appears to be particularly helpful, I have singled it out, but readers should not think of it as the sole locus in the sources listed where relevant topics are treated or to which readers should restrict their reading. Most of the pertinent ideas are scattered throughout the texts.

Although both the works of art and the philosophical essays contained in the first part of the book address similar topics, they do so differently—the first through images, the second through discourse. The philosophical discussion enters into a dialogue with the particularities of the art in order to illustrate these two different perspectives and to facilitate their comparison. Estévez's work is not presented as an illustration of philosophical ideas but as a source of philosophical understanding and speculation. In addition, the images and essays are intended to prompt readers to formulate views about the relationship between art and philosophy.

The essays are gathered into four general topics: knowledge, reality, society, and destiny. The first raises questions concerning self-knowledge and the origin, means, and object of understanding, including faith and reason. The second turns to the difficulties in grasping change, the nature of the universe, and the place of humans in it. The third explores various relations in society, between social groups, the self and the other, and women and men. And the fourth considers freedom and determinism, providence, and predestination.

The argumentative part of the book closes with a short conclusion. The Appendices that follow include the interview with Estévez mentioned earlier, a short biographical chronology of the artist, and a checklist of the exhibition "Carlos Estévez's Images of Thought," at which many of the works to which this book refers are to be exhibited. A bibliography of pertinent sources for Estévez, Cuban art, and the sources cited is added at the end.

Different parts of this book should appeal to different audiences. The essays on Estévez's art contained in the first part are not intended as technical discussions but rather as accessible interpretations that can give rise to further reflection. The second part of this book is meant as the presentation of the philosophical position that inspires the entire volume and should appeal in particular to those interested in philosophical speculation. The biographical and bibliographical materials are provided for information and research.

Sometimes, the discussion relies on views I have developed elsewhere, although in every case I have added new angles to them and in some cases changed them substantially. Most important among the sources where these perspectives have been previously developed are the following, in chronological order: *A Theory of Textuality: The Logic and Epistemology* (1995), *Texts: Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Audience* (1996), *Metaphysics and its Task*: *The Search for the Categorial Foundation of Knowledge* (1999), *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective* (2000), *How Can We Know What God Means? The Interpretation of Revelation* (2001), *Old Wine in New Skins: The Role of Tradition in Communication, Knowledge, and Group Identity* (2003), *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality* (2005), and *Latinos in America: Philosophy and Social Identity* (2008).

Let me finish by thanking those who have contributed in significant ways to make this project possible. Most of all, I am grateful to Carlos Estévez, without whose inspiring work and efficient cooperation this book would have been impossible. The working relationship between us has been wonderful and one of the most pleasurable aspects of this project. He also was gracious in providing permissions for printing images of the works included here and for helping in the selection process. I am also especially grateful to four friends who read different versions of the manuscript and came up with extraordinarily good suggestions and criticisms. In every case, their comments, arising from very different perspectives, elicited important changes in the book. Carolyn Korsmeyer brought to her reading not only a recognized expertise in aesthetics and feminism but also a fine sensitivity for the interpretation of art. William Irwin's experience with pop culture and hermeneutics introduced a welcome perspective on the text. Eduardo Mendieta provided a strong Continental philosophical point of view and an understanding of Latin American art. And Charles Burroughs added his noted erudition as art historian. I also am grateful to Susan Smith for helping with the bibliography and for compiling the index. The Samuel P. Capen Chair in Philosophy and Comparative Literature at the University at Buffalo sponsored the cost of reproducing the images of the artworks. Lisa Chesnel, acquisition editor at State University of New York Press, took an early interest in this project, which continued with Larin McLaughlin. And

Eileen Meehan at the production end of things, efficiently saw the publication through.

I also need to thank Sandra H. Olsen, Director of the University at Buffalo Galleries, Sandra Firmin, Curator of the Galleries, and Robert Scalise, Assistant Director for Exhibitions and Collections for the UB Anderson Gallery for the time, effort, and enthusiasm they put into the organization of the exhibition of Estévez's work.

1

Art and Philosophy

On a recent trip to New York City to attend the opening of a Cuban art exhibition organized by Glexis Novoa, an artist and a curator whose work my wife and I admire, we decided to take the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). When we arrived we saw advertised an exhibition of the work of Martín Ramírez in the Museum of Folk Art, located next to the MoMA. We had seen pictures of Ramírez's work before and had been intrigued by them, so we decided to go in.

Ramírez was a Mexican laborer who came to the United States to work on the railroad. After years of struggles, he ended up in a mental institution, where he was diagnosed as catatonic schizophrenic. He did not talk, but he drew and painted pictures on any pieces of paper he could find. His work is a stream of trains, tunnels, cowboys, *campesinos,* city escapes, and virgins. The human figures usually are trapped in buildings and cells from which escape seems impossible. Visually, the work is appealing to some audiences and disturbing to others, but it is difficult not to be moved by it.

Approximately ninety pieces were displayed in the exhibition, roughly one fourth of the extant work from the artist. After two hours of marveling at the stunning character of the art, we were on our way to the elevators, when my wife, who, unlike me, frequently strikes up casual conversations with strangers, said to one of the guards: "Not bad for a nut, don't you think?" The guard responded with quite a bit of animation: "Nut? No, this guy was not crazy at all! He knew more about life than we do." This was unexpected and serious, so I told Norma, "Let's go back, we better take another look at these pictures."

The guard had struck a chord. He had made us realize that Ramírez's pictures were not just what they looked like; there was something deeper, and perhaps disturbing, in them. Until that point I had been looking at the work in formalist terms, as striking images devoid of a philosophical dimension, but the guard's comment awakened me to a different perspective, which also contrasted with the commentary on the works presented at the exhibition. The curators had done a fine job of assembling opinion about Ramírez. A

psychologist spoke about Ramírez's mental condition, and whether he was in fact schizophrenic. A sociologist discussed the social factors that influenced the work. An art historian located the art in a historical context. And the person who discovered Ramírez narrated the story of the discovery and how the art establishment had first turned its back on the work. All of this was interesting and useful, but one thing was missing: the philosophy, which is what the comment from the guard suggested. He had given a brief, but significant, interpretation of the philosophical relevance of the work: it was about life and it showed a kind of knowledge and wisdom sometimes lacking in contemporary society. And indeed, upon reflection it reveals the human condition, its loneliness and *angst*.

If this is not a philosophical interpretation, then what is? But how could it be taken seriously? What did it add to what the psychologist, sociologist, art historian, and biographer had said? And was it significant, or should it be dismissed merely as a reaction of no consequence, by a person without proper credentials? The guard had, in quite simple terms, posed for me a most interesting philosophical question, the relation between philosophy and art, and the consequent issue of the viability and significance of philosophical interpretations of art.

Philosophy has seldom ignored art. Questions about the nature of art go back to the very beginning of the discipline, to Plato in particular, and modern and contemporary philosophers have devoted considerable time and effort to the exploration of philosophical problems that arise in the context of art. Such topics as the essence of the aesthetic, the nature of representation and its role in art, the relation between form and content, the significance of abstraction, and many others are common throughout the history of philosophy. Recently there has been substantial interest in the cognitive and epistemic issues raised by art, especially painting.[1] And the use of artists and their works as sources of philosophical reflection related to the philosophy of art is common. However, it has been comparatively rare in the history of philosophy to find authors who have found in visual art in particular, the source of philosophical inspiration quite apart from issues in aesthetics, such as the problems of free will and determinism, predestination, or the nature of reality.

The twentieth century saw an increase in these latter sorts of discussions. Consider, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre's speculations about distance and emptiness in the context of Giacometti, Jacques Derrida's use of two of Goya's paintings to philosophize about the colossal, Gilles Deleuze's ruminations about sensation based on the work of Francis Bacon, or Michel Foucault's employment of Velásquez's *Las Meninas* to raise questions about the role of representation in Western epistemology.[2] Among the most famous philosophers who have made use of visual art in their philosophy are Walter

Benjamin (Klee), Martin Heidegger (van Gogh), and Michel Foucault (Magritte).[3] Still, this is not as frequent as the use of art as a locus for the discussion of aesthetic issues. Most philosophical analyses of art aim to explain what philosophers think artists are doing and to tell us how to view something as art, in addition to providing answers to other issues that arise from the consideration of art.[4] And many of those who use works of art to address philosophical problems seem to do so as loci for the discussion of these problems largely independently of the philosophical take a work of art might have or the philosophical understanding of the views of the artist who made it or the audience that confronts it. When Deleuze was asked if the aim of his book on Bacon was to make readers better see the artist's paintings, he agreed that it would have that effect if it were successful, but he added that it had a higher aspiration, "to approach something that would be the common ground of words, lines, colors, and even sounds."[5] In short, his primary aim was to achieve a sound philosophical view of art rather than to enlighten us about Bacon's work in particular.

Indeed, many interpretations of art that are presented as philosophical can be disputed because they do not seem to be truly philosophical, or because they do not appear to be interpretations properly speaking, or even because the artistic credentials of their objects are questionable. This is not as frequent with philosophical interpretations of other cultural phenomena or other kinds of interpretations of art. It is easy to find philosophical interpretations of literature, such as the speculations that Jorge Luis Borges's stories have elicited.[6] And psychological interpretations of art, even of the great masters of the Renaissance, abound.[7] The battle between "philosophers" and "poets" goes back to the beginning of philosophy, but it is particularly acrimonious when it concerns philosophy and the visual arts.

The reverse also is true. Much visual art seems to have little to do with philosophy, and many artists, art critics, and even philosophers have argued that it should not have anything to do with it, or, if it does, then this is not a source of value in it but may be detrimental. Still, there can be little question that much visual art involves philosophy. Consider, for example, Raphael's *School of Athens,* Goya's *The Executions of the Third of May 1808,* Picasso's *Guernica,* and Estévez's *Irreversible Processes.* In the *School of Athens,* Raphael presents us with a kind of summary of ancient Greek philosophy, with two central contending philosophical views, the Platonic and the Aristotelian: Plato signals upward, presumably to the world of transcendent ideas, whereas Aristotle points downward, toward the empirical world of experience. In *The Executions of the Third of May 1808,* Goya provides a stark condemnation of the executions carried out by the French and thus voices a cry for national freedom. Picasso's *Guernica* is nothing if not an exposé of the horrors of war and the inhumanity of which humans are capable. And Estévez's *Irreversible*

Processes poses the problem of freedom and determinism: although we seem to be in control of some of our actions, others are clearly beyond it.

Philosophy and art have not had an easy life together. Beginning with Plato, there has been a philosophical tradition that has regarded art with suspicion, often as even dangerous. For Plato, art in general interferes with the grasp of truth and the nature of reality. Artworks are far removed from the real and constitute obstacles in understanding how things truly are because of their engagement with the senses and emotions at the expense of the intellect. A painting is a copy of an idea the artist has, which is itself a copy of objects in the world of experience, which are in turn copies of the real objects of knowledge, Plato's notorious ideas. The Myth of the Cave, presented in *The Republic,* dramatically illustrates this view by showing how the artifacts that humans construct, as well as their shadows projected on a wall, are the objects we see in the obscurity of our existence on earth, where we are surrounded by appearances far removed from the reality represented by the sun and the objects it illumines outside of the cave.[8]

On the opposite side are authors who regard art as something much loftier than philosophy. In the nineteenth century in particular, with the rise of Romanticism and the reaction against the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason, some authors placed art on a pedestal and devalued philosophy. The true way of grasping reality, of understanding ourselves and the world, they argued, was through emotion, not reason. Viewed as an effective trigger of emotion, art became exalted, and philosophy, as a discipline of knowledge that relies on rational discourse, came to be considered rather a lower means of enlightenment. The analysis proper to philosophical thinking kills what it analyzes—it terminates life in order to examine it—whereas art fully preserves its object. Art is not philosophy, and to try to project philosophy into it and use it in art results in the destruction of art.

Why such resistance to putting together art and philosophy? The answer is not difficult to surmise. For one, both of the approaches mentioned tend to rely heavily on a sharp distinction between emotion, on the one hand, and rational, discursive thought, on the other. Emotion often has been viewed as a matter of sensation and feeling, whereas reason has been regarded as having to do with cognition and propositional thought, although this opposition has not gone unchallenged, and many philosophers argue that emotion includes an important cognitive dimension.[9] Leaving the controversy over the nature of emotion aside, however, at least four other areas are used to contrast art and philosophy and to argue that it is impossible to put them together: medium, means, end, and practitioners.

The argument based on the medium is frequently used in the context of visual art. The favorite medium of philosophy and the favorite medium of visual art differ substantially, indicating a serious rift between them. The main

medium of philosophy is language, but it is not for visual art, even though from time to time visual art does use language and there are traditions in which writing is considered high art. Writing as art is common in the East, and it is arguable that it also has been practiced in the West, particularly in the Middle Ages. Still, plastic artists do not generally use words but instead turn to materials and objects that they manipulate in various ways. A sculptor might use marble, a painter paints, and drawing usually requires pencil and paper. Visual art is tied very closely to the material process of production. Painting, for example, seems to be concerned with mixing and diluting materials. There is something alchemic about it, as James Elkins has argued, it is "a kind of immersion in substances."[10] Indeed, in the interview included in the Appendices, Estévez uses the language of alchemy to describe the way he works: "even the feeling of my drawings is . . . material, because I confront the paper as alchemists used their sketch books." On the contrary, philosophers practice their craft with words almost exclusively, used either orally or in writing.[11] And although it is true that philosophers have from time to time expressed their ideas in poetry, and poetry is a kind of art, even then the medium they use seems far removed from the favorite medium of the visual arts.

Philosophers talk to each other, or even to themselves, and they write about what they think, whereas visual artists turn to images, perceptual effects, and material objects and substances. And when artists use words in their art, they have to sort their status, because, as Danto has pointed out, "words are both vehicles of meanings and material objects."[12] Indeed, painters often use words nonlinguistically, because, as Foucault put it, "the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. . . . Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say."[13]

The argument against the marriage of philosophy and art based on the medium derives further substance from the fact that visual artists do not, on the whole, produce treatises; they do not write articles; they do not give lectures; and they do not engage in discussion and argument when they function as artists. It is unusual to have an artist respond to the work of another artist, who in turn responds to it, in the way philosophers do. This kind of dialogue, which is essential to philosophy, is missing in visual art. Philosophers regularly produce dialogues—think of the paradigmatic work of Plato—and they engage in disputation and argument with each other. The centerpiece of medieval philosophy, for example, is the oral disputation, which only eventually was put down on parchment. To this day, dialogue and disputation are fundamental in the discipline, as any gathering of philosophers will prove, whereas the identity of a visual work of art depends very much on elements that are not words and of non-linguistic elements in the words

the work may use.[14] When plastic artists use words, they do not seem to be concerned with the logic of thinking but with the way words contribute to an overall image. This brings me to the second area that is used to argue against putting art and philosophy together, the means.

The principles that guide philosophers in their craft involve reasoning and logic; they provide structure to their discourse. Philosophers examine claims about the world made by others and themselves, and they subject these claims to scrutiny, frequently finding fault with them. They do this by examining the evidence offered and by subjecting the arguments given in their favor to the test of logic. Philosophical treatises contain such things as the presentation and explanation of theses, the examination of evidence and arguments provided for them, the evaluation of such evidence and arguments, and the development of arguably better alternative views and arguments.

Aristotle, for example, takes issue with Plato's view, that the way to explain knowledge is by reference to a world of ideas independent of experience and located in a realm of their own. The Platonic explanation of how we know triangularity is not through our perception of individual triangles, because none of them fits exactly the definition of a triangle; we know triangularity because we have direct access to the idea of triangularity, independent of our experience. Aristotle then proceeds to show how Plato's theory creates more conceptual problems than it solves, in part because it cannot adequately explain how these ideas are related to the objects of which they are supposed to be models.

In contrast, art seems to have little to do with reasoning, logic, or even affirmation, and if it has to do with reasoning, then the reasoning is very different from that used in philosophy.[15] Artists are not concerned with presenting explicit theses they affirm but rather with the creation of their own worlds.[16] Few of the elements that go into the makeup of a philosophical product are present in art; there is no presentation of evidence or arguments; there is no evaluation of the evidence or the arguments; and there is no reasoning dialectic. Art does not engage in the kind of procedures common in philosophy. This becomes evident when one puts a philosophical treatise, say Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* next to a work of art, such as Estévez's *Self-fishing.* The gap appears enormous. It becomes even more clear when the two works are about the same topic, as happens with Estévez's *Irreversible Processes* and a particular question in Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*. Both deal with the issue of whether humans act freely, but they are worlds apart in their approach.

This gap can be explained in part because the end pursued by philosophers is generally the formulation of hypotheses they aim to demonstrate, even if the hypothesis is that there are no hypotheses. Philosophers defend some view or other or present criticisms of views with which they disagree. And even when a philosopher reaches a puzzling dead end, as happens frequently

in the Platonic Dialogues, this is regarded as an achievement, in that it reveals the inadequacy of a certain position assumed by some to be correct.

Artists, however, rarely seek to prove or disprove anything directly, and generally they formulate no explicit hypotheses which they defend or attack. This is why works of art, even those that have a narrative component, can be subjected to a variety of interpretations. Indeed, Adorno has claimed that art disappoints those who seek "conclusions," for these require concepts and judgment, and art in his view lacks both.[17] A work like Estévez's *Forging People* surely tells us something, and what it tells us is supposedly true, but the message, if it can be called that, is not unambiguous or explicit. It is not like most claims found in philosophical treatises; both its character and the way it is presented are different. *Forging People* can be interpreted in diverse ways. The piece does not present us with a doctrine about how groups of people come to be. Rather, it becomes a means whereby an audience can consider various ways to approach this matter: people can be seen as products of divine creation, biology, social forces, or human imagination.

Artists create universes, with their own dialectics and rules, and although some art appears to express views, this is not a necessary condition of art as it seems to be of philosophy. Art may lead observers to formulate hypotheses and draw conclusions, but it is always risky to attribute such moves to the artists. This contrasts with what philosophers usually seek, and may be what Adorno is trying to put into words when he notes that "philosophy bears upon reality and its works," whereas art "is more autarchically organized."[18]

The divide between philosophy and art finds additional support in that the practitioners of art and philosophy generally have different talents, strengths, and weaknesses. Philosophers are trained to detect minor shifts in meaning and logic in sentences, arguments, and claims, but they might not realize the significance of different ways of rendering a leaf, of a brushstroke, of the use of a particular color, or the significance of rhyme, the sorts of things that are essential to art. Philosophers are used to dealing with concepts and their analysis, sometimes exclusively, whereas visual artists work primarily with materials at hand, such as paints, colors, stone, and pencils. Indeed, artists often have difficulty expressing themselves when asked to provide conceptual explanations of what they are trying to do with their art.[19] Philosophers appear to have very different modes of operation, sensitivities, and visions than artists. Philosophy involves propositional understanding, whereas visual art is about perceptual grasp.[20] Even if both enterprises involve truth seeking, as many philosophers and artists have claimed, their approaches appear incompatible to many.[21] And, for others, such as J. M. Bernstein, they are at least irreducible or untranslatable into each other.[22]

The seeming opposition between art and philosophy stands in the way of accomplishing what is suggested in the subtitle of this book. If those who

claim that philosophy and art are incompatible are correct, then the philosophical interpretation of art is doomed from the start, in that the task requires establishing a relation between two enterprises that are opposed to each other or at least belong to two different realms. Of course, not every one agrees. If Danto is right and art "has passed over into a kind of consciousness of itself and become . . . its own philosophy," then the philosophical interpretation of art should be possible.[23] But Danto's move has been criticized by those who see it as a misunderstanding of art and the elimination of an important distinction between it and philosophy.[24] And, for our purposes, it would not work in any case. Obviously, if one of the opposites of an opposition is eliminated by turning it into the other, then the opposition vanishes. But to do this is not to explain how the opposites are related. It does not help to argue that the philosophical interpretation of art is possible because art is philosophy or philosophy is art. What we need is an account that maintains their integrity, seeing how they are different and in conflict, and yet explains how they can be related in the philosophical interpretation of art.[25]

But are those who find an irreconcilable opposition between art and philosophy correct? The interpretations of Estévez's works included in the first part of this book are presented as evidence that they are not. Still, the essays do not explain why. For that, as Plato would say, we need more than examples; we need an understanding of what a philosophical interpretation of art is and how it works.

Our task begins with two initial questions: What is art? What is a philosophical interpretation? Without answers to these questions, we would be hard-pressed to claim that we have understood all that is involved in the philosophical interpretation of art, or that we understand in what sense the essays on Estévez's art given here can qualify as philosophical interpretations. But the answers to both questions are highly contested. The degree of disagreement concerning the first is evident in ordinary life from the fact that the same objects are regarded by some as important artworks and by others as mere rubbish. This is matched by the number of conflicting definitions of art among philosophers of art. And the views concerning philosophical interpretation are not less contested, in particular because both philosophy and interpretation are highly controversial notions. The hermeneutical literature is full of conflicting views about interpretation, whereas philosophers themselves disagree strongly about what is and what is not philosophy.

Here I cannot examine even a small number of the views that have been proposed about the notions of interpretation, art, or philosophy. Rather, I shall have to make do by proposing views of them that I have more extensively defended elsewhere and that hopefully will help readers think about this relationship and the essays in this volume. I begin with interpretation and then move to art and its philosophical interpretation. The reason is that

certain conceptions of art and its relation to interpretation and philosophy can muddle the discussion if we begin with art without first making clear some things about interpretation. The overall moral of the story is that the philosophical interpretation of art is not only possible, but indeed enlightening, apart from being fun, for both the philosopher and the artist. I plan to offer support for this first by presenting philosophical interpretations of the work of Carlos Estévez and second through conceptual analysis. Before I turn to this double task, however, let me say something about Estévez and his art.

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Carlos Estévez and His Art

Carlos Estévez is a Cuban-born artist now residing in Miami. He was educated and trained in Cuba but has also lived in France, Norway, Mexico, and England, and he has visited many other countries. Although still under forty years of age, he has been very prolific, having produced hundreds of works. His art has attracted substantial attention in Europe, the United States, and Latin America. The range of the work extends from sculptures and installations to oil and acrylic paintings on canvas and paper, drawings on paper, assemblages, collages, and combinations of these. Particularly prominent are the works on and with paper, for Estévez seems to have a fascination with this medium and has explored it in multiple ways.

Estévez's technique, like that of most Cuban-trained artists, is superb and broad. He can work with any traditional materials but also has incorporated nontraditional elements in the art. For example, he regularly collects objects of various kinds, particularly artifacts such as bottles and gadgets he finds in rummage sales and flea markets, which he later integrates into his works.

Unlike many Cuban artists, Estévez does not seem to be explicitly concerned with Cuba or the events precipitated in 1959 by the triumph of Fidel Castro's revolution. Nothing in his art suggests anything about Cuba. It contains no iconic images related to the island, no forts or palm trees, no papayas or bags of *chicharrones,* and no portraits of Cubans, whether ordinary citizens or political leaders. Nor is there anything in the work that deals with the particular social and political issues that have so concerned many Cubans for the past fifty years. The images used are universal, and so are the themes explored.

This contrasts with the work of many other Cuban artists who find inspiration in Cuban themes. Cuban art in the twentieth century tried to integrate recent artistic developments in Europe.[1] In doing so, it also attempted to explore Cuban culture, *lo cubano,* and embed the developments of European art in a local context. The use of African themes by some of the masters of twentieth-century art in Europe, such as Picasso and Modigliani, became for Cuban artists the use of Afro-Cuban themes, or of themes that have to do with the Cuban landscape and the Cuban reality. The great master of