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Introduction

In the following essay I discuss one of the fundamental actions that works of art serve to perform—the action of world projection as I shall call it. Hugo Van Der Goes, by way of his Adoration of the Shepherds now hanging in the Uffizi in Florence, projected a world containing shepherds, oxen, a barn, angels, Mary, Joseph, etc. That is one illustration of the action I have in mind. I shall look at the nature of the entities used to perform the action—namely, artifacts of art. I shall look at the nature of that which is projected—worlds. And I shall look at the nature of the action itself—projection.

Works of art serve to perform an enormous variety of actions, both in fact and by the intent of their makers. That is true for our society. It is true for all others as well. Artistically man acts. So my topic of discussion is one, but only one, from among all the different actions that works of art serve to perform. To introduce the discussion I shall sketch out, in Part One, a general schematism for thinking of the role of art in action.

Aesthetic inquiry since its origins in the eighteenth century has rarely set art in the context of action. In one major tradition it has focused on the work of art itself and the aesthetic experience of the beholder. In another, it has focused on the artist’s experience of creation. In none has it explicitly focused on the action.

Admittedly it is possible to regard my project in a conservative light with respect to these modern traditions. For whatever I else the aesthetic experience may be, it is an experience attained in and by submitting some entity to the action of aesthetic contemplation. And whatever else the creative experience may be, it is an experience attained in and by performing the action of artistic creation. So certain facets of the role of art in action have in fact been the concern of modern aesthetics. In exploring the action of world projection I am acting in continuity with the tradition.