

On Being a Graphic Artist

By M. C. Escher

It is human nature to want to exchange ideas, and I believe that, at bottom, every artist wants no more than to tell the world what he has to say. I have sometimes heard painters say that they paint "for themselves;" but I think they would soon have painted their fill if they lived on a desert island. The primary purpose of all art forms, whether it's music, literature, or the visual arts, is to say something to the outside world; in other words, to make a personal thought, a striking idea, an inner emotion perceptible to other people's senses in such a way that there is no uncertainty about the maker's intentions. The artist's ideal is to produce a crystal-clear reflection of his own self. Thus an artist's talent is not only determined by the quality of the thoughts he wishes to convey for anyone can have the most beautiful, the most moving images in his head but also by his ability to express themselves in such a way that they get through to other people, undistorted. The result of the struggle between the thought and the ability to express it, between dream and reality, is seldom more than a compromise or an approximation. Thus there is little chance that we will succeed in getting through to a large audience, and on the whole we are quite satisfied if we are understood and appreciated by a small number of sensitive, receptive people...

There is a noticeable difference between two groups of people that can be distinguished and compared because they have ideas and opinions with an apparently different orientation. I could not think of two names to characterize and distinguish them. The terms "rationalist" and "sentimentalist" for example, do not express what I mean. For want of anything better I have called them "feeling people" and "thinking people;" but their real

character will become clear only if I describe them.

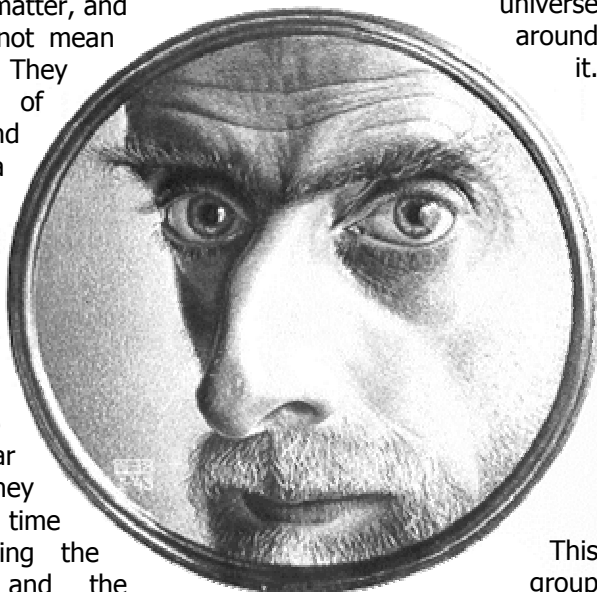
By "feeling people" I mean those who, amid everything surrounding them, are most interested in the relationship between themselves and others, and in relationships between people in general. Admittedly they are aware of phenomena in the outside world that are not directly related to people, such as nature, matter, and space, but all that do not mean very much to them. They consider it to be of secondary importance and regard it as a stage, a complex of attributes whose religion, justice, trade, and usually art, too, are in the first place related to the feeling relationships between people.

Most artists belong to this group. This is clear from the preference they have had since time immemorial for depicting the human countenance and the human form; they are fascinated by specifically human qualities, both physical and spiritual. And even if they do not depict man himself, even when a poet is describing a landscape or a painter is doing a still life, they almost always approach their subjects from their interest in man.

It may seem paradoxical to say that there are similarities between a poetical and a commercial mind, but it is a fact that both a poet and a businessman are constantly dealing with problems that are directly related to people and for which sensitivity is of prime importance. The business-like mind is sometimes described as being cold, sober, calculating, hard; but perhaps these are simply qualities that are necessary for dealing with people if one wants to achieve anything. One is always concerned with the mysterious, incalculable, dark, hidden aspects for which there is no easy formula, but which form essentially the same human

element as that which inspires the poet.

Then there is the other group, which I have rather inadequately described as "thinking people". In this group I include people who consider that they can attribute a specific significance, independent of mankind, to nonhuman natural phenomena, to the earth on which they live and the rest of the universe around it.



This group understands the language of matter, space, and universe. They are receptive toward this outside world; they accept it as something that exists objectively, separate from man, which they can not only see but can also observe closely, study, and even attempt to understand, bit by bit. In doing this they are able to forget themselves to a greater extent than the feeling person usually can.

When someone forgets himself, this by no means makes him altruistic; when a thinking person forgets himself, he immediately also forgets his fellowman, he loses himself and his humanity by becoming engrossed in his subject. Thus he is in a sense more contemplative than a feeling person. Anyone who is profoundly concerned with material things in general, and whose work does not require the involvement of other people, belongs to this group. Factory workers or carpenters may belong to it just as much as chemists or astronomers. They are

people for whom the world is so real and tangible that they generally do not take into account how subjective everything is nevertheless. For as far as I know, there is no proof whatever of the existence of an objective reality apart from our senses, and I do not see why we should accept the outside world as such solely by virtue of our senses.

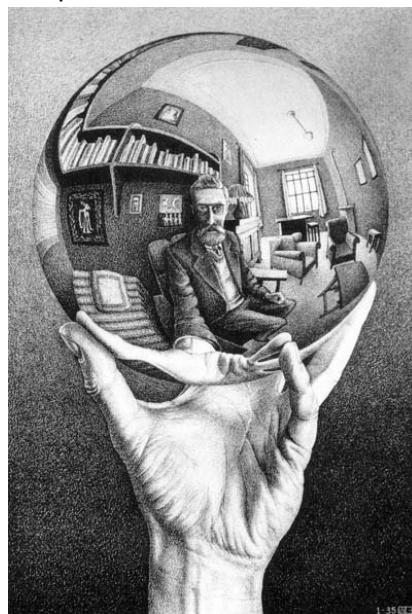
These reality enthusiasts are possibly playing at hide-and-seek; at any rate they like to hide themselves, though they are not usually aware of it. They simply do it because they happen to have been born with a sense of reality, that is, with a great interest in so-called reality, and because man likes to forget himself. However, it is quite possible that subconscious factors such as a fear of the dark, incomprehensible nature of the human condition sometimes play a role, and that "thinking people" are escaping from this. Disillusion, exhaustion, impotence, and other inhibitions may have led them to seek peace and respite in dealing with matters that are less complicated and easier to grasp than the enigma of man himself.

In these descriptions I have tried to highlight the contrast between the characteristics of the two groups. I do indeed believe that there is a certain contrast between, say, people in scientific professions and people working in the arts. Often there is even mutual suspicion and irritation, and in some cases one group greatly undervalues the other.

Fortunately there is no one who actually has only feeling or only thinking properties. They intermingle like the colors of the rainbow and cannot be sharply divided. Perhaps there is even a transitional group, like the green between the yellow and the blue of the rainbow. This transitional group does not have a particular preference for thinking or feeling, but believes that one cannot do without either the one or the other. At any rate, it is unprejudiced enough to wish for a better

understanding between the two parties...

It is clear that feeling and understanding are not necessarily opposites but that they complement each other. You don't



have to be a physicist to experience the miracle of gravity, but with the aid of our intellect our understanding of a miracle can be enhanced. I do not know if it is true, but I imagine that there are scientists who, by following the paths of the so-called "cold" intellect- possibly without being aware of it are plumbing the depths of a mystery rather than searching for the solution to a problem...

In my prints I try to show that we live in a beautiful and orderly world and not in a chaos without norms, as we sometimes seem to. My subjects are also often playful. I cannot help mocking all our unwavering certainties. It is, for example, great fun deliberately to confuse two and three dimensions, the plane and space, or to poke fun at gravity.

Are you sure that a floor cannot also be a ceiling? Are you absolutely certain that you go up when you walk up a staircase? Can you be definite that it is impossible to eat your cake and have it?

I ask these seemingly crazy questions first of all of myself (for I am my own first viewer) and then

of others who are so good as to come and see my work. It's pleasing to realize that quite a few people enjoy this sort of playfulness and that they are not afraid to look at the relative nature of rock-hard reality.

Above all I am happy about the contact and friendship of mathematicians that resulted from it all. They have often given me new ideas, and sometimes there even is an interaction between us. How playful they can be, those learned ladies and gentlemen!

To tell you the truth, I am rather perplexed about the concept of "art". What one person considers to be "art" is often not "art" to another. "Beautiful" and "ugly" are old-fashioned concepts that are seldom applied these days; perhaps justifiably, who knows? Something repulsive, which gives you a moral hangover, and hurts your ears or eyes, may well be art. Only "kitsch" is not art - we're all agreed about that. Indeed, but what is "kitsch"? If only I knew!

This emotional valuation is too subjective and too vague for me. If I am not mistaken, the words "art" and "artist" did not exist during the Renaissance and before: there were simply architects, sculptors, and painters, practicing a trade.

Printmaking is another of these honest trades, and I consider it a privilege to be a member of the Guild of Graphic Artists. Using a gouge, engraving with a bur in an absolutely smooth block of polished wood, is not something to pride yourself on-it's simply nice work. Only as you get older it's slower and more difficult, and the chips don't fly around the workroom quite so wildly as they used to.

Thus I am a graphic artist heart and soul, though I find the term "artist" rather embarrassing.

M. C. Escher

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Geis, Darlene, Ed. (1981) M. C. Escher, 29 Master Prints. Harry N. Abrams, Inc.