

Ana MATOSO (seminar paper)

Would you experience me? Art as a means of communion

After more than 15 years reflecting on artistic practice, Lev Tolstoy finally finished his polemic treatise *What is Art?* (1897). Since its publication, the theory of art expounded in this work has been either subsumed under the general name of 'expression theory' or rejected for the extreme consequences of its arguments (i.e. the dismissal of almost all of the Western artistic canon).

However, despite the question in its title, *What is Art?* is notoriously amiss in providing any (objective) definition of art. Its author is more interested in disputing the validity of any 'science of beauty', i.e., Aesthetics, in order to put forward a new approach to art. In the author's words: 'Art, all art, has in itself the property of uniting people. All art causes those who perceive the feeling conveyed by the artist to unite in soul, first with the artist, and secondly with all who have received the same impression' (Tolstoy: 120–129).

In the framework of *What is Art?*, art – intentional communication through feeling and emotions – becomes a means of *communion* among people. In the broad sense of 'art' employed in this work, this 'affective' category can accommodate not only works of architecture, poetry, folk tales, drama, music, but also jokes, riddles, rhymes, sermons, processions and church services. It is in the inherent pervasiveness of artistic communication that Tolstoy finds a crucial argument against Plato's verdict, in his *Republic*, that the artist is *persona non grata* in the city.

This paper will focus on the specificity of the process of communicating through art as described in *What is Art?* and will argue that in its invitation to share a community of feeling, art becomes a project of experienced values, of conviviality. Tolstoy's description of art, it turns out, is unexpectedly modern.

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