

## What is True Art or Good Art?

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### ABSTRACT

*In this brief account I argue that art ought to be an enterprise wherein the artist tries to understand his/her process and develop a discursive understanding annexed to or in tandem with practice. I argue that innovation in art – the claims of the great artists – resulted in a certain paradigm shift. Yet the postmodern move towards a largely anti-intellectual polarity does a great disservice to art. I conclude with the necessity to at least define our terms, otherwise the possibility of art even carrying some sense evaporates, let alone any meaningful discrimination.*

### KEYWORDS

*good art; moral, post modernism; aesthetics; relativism*

### INTRODUCTION

In aesthetics, it seems common for the ordinary person to regurgitate “its just personal taste” so that subjectivity is the name of the game and no further discussion or convincing or argument can thenceforth be entered into, let alone resolved. Art history itself is seen to be a discipline that lacks objectivity and is often simply reduced as a conditioned social construction, with no claim to actually deliver knowledge. Art practice fairs no better. There are no clear boundaries or even concept of what constitutes good art let alone art and many commercial galleries simply play the “other” card in justifying their selection of artists, neither based on merit in many cases or indeed any intellectual basis on the part of the artist. This situation is alarming: It means that art has descended into an “anything goes” mess, with little attention to higher principles or meaningful bearings. Of course, such accusations are often welcomed, making the situation ever more dire – a leftist stance of anti-intellectualism which paradoxically and ironically morphs into a sort of authoritarian fascism.

In this essay, I will challenge such assumptions and argue that one can define or discriminate between art proper or true art and nonsense, the latter being the popular output at present. Such an argument is based on the idea that the narrative of art is not arbitrary, that great artists (men and woman) offer paradigm shifts and if not at least stated, an intellectual foundation – and that the reverse is true of bad art. While I argued in a previous paper that art is natural and thus embracing of all peoples, this is not contradicted here. in the same way, I would endorse the great majority to play sport – sport as a necessary good – that does not mean all who play will be great exponents of the game. The same can be said of art.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Art is natural*

The thesis that art is as natural as taking a shower or eating or any other activity we might so label everyday aesthetics or the very flow of life itself is maintained. Just as we let our sons and daughters play a sport at an early age, children have an affinity to making things. Granted, there are techniques and methods that can be taught, yet the creative impulse is

natural and pre-learning as it were. It is only later when the classical is set as a benchmark, that the majority of teenagers never take up art again and few continue along its path, resigned to “I can only draw stick figures” mentality.

Yet if one were to retrieve this sentiment that art is natural, then each person would accept their limitations and yet feel free to express and engage with art. Nevertheless, the claim I would like to make is that true or good art requires both a process of learning and goes beyond mere “playing with color” or “playing with line” or “copying this master” and so on – but requires reflective, analytical, and discursive modalities and developments. In other words, my “art is natural” polemic works to a point – to render art more widespread – but good art goes beyond this. It recognizes art as a discipline with a theory, history, and centuries of practice so that the good artist ought to be steeped in at least some aspects of this. In other words, an artist practices a discipline and a great artist having imbibed aspects of such a discipline will make breakthroughs not simply because of little trivialities and “pretty paintings”, but something deeper, something more enduring and intellectual. Intellectual, yet instantiated as a formal development, as style or as a personal language system.

In other words, the distinction between good art and bad art is not simply a technical one. In fact, there are copyists with much finer technical skills than even such artists, but such art barely qualifies as good art let alone art. Thus, what is significant about a work of art is not simply the level of craft, but the change in conceptual understanding wrought by new perceptual processes. Moreover, it is usually made by those steeped in art theory and practice and not simply gained by the hobbyist or Sunday painter.

### ***Paradigm shift***

When one thinks of the pantheon of great artists (and woman are generally excluded because of social convention and cultural norms which has been changing so will eventually balance out) it is the originality of the work or body of work that stands out: Van Gogh took expression to new heights; Picasso undid traditional painting; Kosuth radically redefined art as did Duchamp; Pollock exemplifies a complete break with hitherto known methods; Klein (Yves) expanded the frontiers of art; Giotto offered a new vision which Masaccio then developed even further and so and on and so forth. In each instance – and there are several such examples spanning a millennium – one finds such art as no less than a paradigm shift.

What is a paradigm shift? A paradigm shift is a revelation of a new kind of state of consciousness, a new way of understanding and seeing things. Such artists were not inarticulate fools who just made experiments in color and line and other formal devices. They were aware of what they were doing and hence especially in the modern era one finds individual artists writing copious notes or fleshing out a manifesto of sorts. In this sense, one notes that in parallel with the motivations of the unconscious is an analytical attempt to rigorously define what their art is about. The combined efforts of critics, aestheticians, theoreticians and historians of art may add even more substance, but the general principle holds: great art is as much a work of the hand and eye as it is of the mind and feelings.

In this regard, the massive output of what is deemed art, even by so-called professionals is simply bad art. Why? Simply put: they have no idea what they are doing. There is no discursive underpinning. To say it is just a recollection in paint or whatever of the beauty of nature with its little dabs of color and delight or that it is autobiographical or even worse, there is simply not even that sort of awareness but simply reproducing “what I like” is pathetic and lacks truth. In my experience as an art critic, this is the usual state of affairs: there is absolutely no attempt to rigorously define and understand their process. I am not

even saying the art is not original, for newness is indeed hard to come by; it is instead simply vacuous however beguiling the image may be or in many instances, simply a skillful craft in which case what distinguishes it from any other activity well done. In my estimation, great art goes beyond this: It represents a paradigm shift of the same ilk as a development from a Newtonian model of the universe to say an Einsteinian one.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***The history of art is not arbitrary***

Given what I have hitherto set forth, the history of art is not arbitrary and is precisely a tracing of a development of style as a reflection of a new metaphysical order. The changing forms from say prehistory archaic art to the great Empires of Egypt, Etruscan, Greek, Roman, the span of the Renaissance towards what has been labelled the high Renaissance; the Romantic versus the Classic; the great plethora of art movements under modernism and the expanded, eclectic vocabulary of the post-modernist and the artists that were spawned under such broad and sweeping headings, represent radical changes in the very ontology of art, of representation and meaning (I am aware that this is peculiarly Western and the same sense of innovation and shifts in consciousness may be found in the evolution of art in the East and Africa, though of course with distinct modes of mimetic and abstract leanings, methods and philosophical and religious sentiment and expression).

Thus conceived, my argument that most art, contemporary and past has no bearing on such a trajectory and is therefore rightly excluded from the pantheon of great artworks or artists, is correct. They lack a shift in consciousness, they follow the norms of the day. It is the innovative, the original and those who took the time to think about what art is or may be, that truly qualify as artists who have changed the status quo and thus motivate a change in the very direction of art – and by extension, of our understanding and meaning-making. They stand aloof from their time, even as they are influenced by it. Hence it is not surprising that I seldom if ever find such a standout artist. Yes, art is natural, a gift that as humans we may all share – but the proclivity to great art, to true art that will be enduring is reserved for the few, just as we hail few athletes though we may all run and play.

Granted I have simplified the “picture” somewhat – there may be artists and styles overlooked and certain microscopic complexities where I have given a generalized overview. Yet, I do not think the general principle false – clearly, whether formalist, expressive, iconographic or stylistic, the changes wrought by a few are those of significant shifts in ways of understanding the human condition and molding a new future, one’s that were usually initially rebellious and vied against tradition and in so doing even transcend the subjectivities of such artists, albeit paradoxically it is through such subjectivities that a new panorama in vision is ignited. For example, the artist Reinhardt attempted to define art as radically different from non-art and created a body of work consistent with a realm of pure art, a polemic where art could exist in contradistinction to that which is not art. He famously wrote (1975:12): “The one thing to say about *art* is that it is one thing. *Art* is *art-as-art* and everything else is everything else. *Art-as-art* is nothing but *art*”.

A further example: it is not arbitrary that say Seurat is credited as being a great artist. His style, later dubbed pointillism is indeed unique and he was not simply painting pretty Sunday afternoons. Instead, he gave a scientific account of color and light itself and the mundane transforms into a new kind of representation, one that perhaps prophetically foreshadows the optical and digital revolution. Or consider the abstract expressionist Barnett Newman, where the artists refused to be part of a merely formalist exposition of his work, remarking that “there is no good art about nothing”. His concerns were metaphysical, not simply formal. While the work of the historian and theoretician may be

necessary to classify, label and define, the great artists did much of that work themselves and hence I conclude that any artists of any artistic worth contemporaneously is enjoined to do the same. In art schools today the expectation is generally that the final year students motivate their art, noting influences in theory and practice and their contribution. This I endorse, but all too often is not followed through in later practice. The result is the intellectual backwardness of most art.

### ***A challenge to so-called artists***

Given my arguments, it ought to be clear that I value art as a discipline in much the same way that the robust sciences have its methods, processes of development and at the other end, innovation, and new discoveries. Yet, what do we find but a mindless trudge in the dark with no intellectual work pioneered, as if the artist is just privy to random feelings and handywork. This divests art of its true wealth which, I believe is to offer insight, granted usually in pictorial form. Of course, there is the other side of the debate. Today one may gain a masters, even a doctorate in art practice and while this is a movement in the right direction, I surmise, few are able to transform that process into later success as artists, where luck, institutional bias and business savvy usually have more clout.

Notwithstanding, my challenge to anyone who calls themselves an artist and a creator of good art, is that they should attempt i) to situate it within or as a rebuff to the history of art and ii) should explain the intellectual basis of what they do. The worn-out idea that the art should just speak, as if form is inherently as simple as a language like “pass me the salt” is spurious. Instead, text, image and curatorship are required. While many commercial galleries attempt this, I have found that there is usually a paucity of meaning, other than some glib political statement or some kind of identity politics. Why should metaphysics no longer hold value? Why should the moderns and the Enlightenment all be castigated wherein the very visual and digital and progressive society we know live in is a product of that rational enterprise. Today it is about sensation and personality, and this has little to do with truly great art.

My challenge to so-called artists (and I regard myself as such) is to ask in what way their art is original, not simply because we each have a unique fingerprint and that marks the end of the story, but in a much deeper sense. What is the intellectual basis for their art? A retort that it is all just feeling or submerged in the subconscious won't do and while I concede that it is not science, like science why should we expect anyone who switches on a light to be a scientist. Similarly, painting a vase of flowers or instant photography as is the norm does not make one an artist. It is usually a slow process where late in life one realizes that a personal language has been forged, but my challenge is that as that language is so forged, part of the process is verbal and analytical and should both imbed itself in the (visual) art and perhaps, like the conceptualists include text as well, if not as part of the art, then at least on the periphery. Art is natural, but great art is not. Kant, Critique of Judgment (1790:160, 293-94) argues that in order for a work of art to be beautiful, it must be a product of a genius. The aesthetic genius creates fine art which incites the imagination and understanding to free play, without the use of concepts. This does not mean there is no analytical thought in the process as understanding is a key element, only that the work of art cannot necessarily be pinned to an exact or specific concept or set of meanings. This only renders verbal and visual processes in a more fruitful dialectic.

### ***The Post-modern problem and beyond***

I have argued that the anti-intellectualism of the contemporary art world in fact undermines the very flourishing of true and good art. I have thus set a challenge for would-be artists to

think about their process, to be aware of the theory and history of their discipline and to not shy away from philosophical thought. You may retort, in line with the post structural turn, that this is just my relative subjectivity with no more sense than anyone else's opinion no matter who they may be. Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne* (1984) declared the end of the modes and concepts that had fueled 18th-century scientific rationalism and the industrial and capitalist society to which it gave birth: the "grand narratives" of historical progress and concepts of universal moral value. While in the sciences such a position would never be maintained – absolute relativism and subjectivity – in the arts it is common practice. This essay is a response to this short-sightedness. If post modernism is to be overcome and original art produced, I believe this is one way to transcend the idiosyncratic and find viable forms that – and here I again I run the risk of attack – creates a more progressive society. Progress is measured not only in creative advancements, but in line with many critics of old that may have begun with Plato, includes a moral stance. This is given short thrift today. Yet I see it as essential to the arts and their continued beneficial effect in society. A moral stance that may be of a particular culture and yet transcends it. A universal, like the proposition that two and two equals four. Of course, past art has had a moral directive, but usually one invested with propaganda and discrimination. Here I argue for basic humane principles and the relativist argument simply does not work. What form that may take, of course is still an open question. Enter good art.

## **CONCLUSION**

This essay will probably not be popular: No one wants to hear the idea of good versus bad art or that art is like science in some ways or that an inarticulate artist is problematic or that galleries are simply concerned with reorientating the hierarchies and past prejudice and the like. Yet I believe we must engage with such questions if art is to regain some meaning. I have also set a challenge for those who deem themselves artists and suggest that true and good art can only occur amidst discursive development. I argued that the very notion of an art history is predicated on such transformations, a paradigm shift, and is not simply an arbitrary history or a discriminatory education. Finally, I argue that evolving a philosophy concomitant to one's practice also harbors a moral dimension, a key aspect of real art. At least the capacity to define our terms is a necessary first step in the right direction to find sense in art, without which no discussion could even take place and certainly no judgement.

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