

WHAT IS ART?

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(Update of note published in the Spring 2013 issue of U3A 'Philosophy Network Newsletter')

I shall start by saying what I feel art is not: it is not simply a reproduction of a visual or acoustic image that pre-exists; it is not a random set of visual or acoustic components. Photocopying does not, of itself, produce art. A photograph may indeed be a 'reproduction' of a visual image, but what can make it art is the human intervention in the selection and composition of the subject material. Human choice in the selection and composition is the key.

Art is a human activity to communicate an emotional appreciation, idea or concept. The 'means' may be in two or three dimensions, it may involve variations with time (for example music, cinema or theatre) and it may appeal via perception through one or more of the senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch. It is not a means for communication of facts - but may well induce feelings about factual or emotional matters.

As a means for communication, art involves both 'transmission' and 'reception'. So art is not just an expression of self, but involves a linkage to some audience. To be effective it requires a 'speaking to the condition' of an audience. The 'audience' may be just a single individual – or many people. Taking this view provides a basis for appreciating and assessing art. It also makes clear that what is 'Art' to some people may not be to others – and this may vary over the passage of time and the context in which it is experienced. While facts may be involved (for example in writing or in photographs) the art is not in the facts, but their selection and presentation.

I am happy that one may just judge art in terms of what it does do, or not do, for oneself. However, I feel there should be something more – some common factors. With art, as I know of it (up to after the second world war - the period of many 'isms'!) one can recognize that 'art' would include one or more of the following: skill, craft, workmanship, beauty (maybe) and also a drawing attention to a 'hey, look at this' surprising conjunction of recognizable items perhaps in an odd context. If none of these are apparent it is difficult to claim the item is art. There needs to be some 'communication' to the viewer/audience. I am very happy with artists such as Hepworth, Moore, Nash, Mondrian, Klee, Matisse and Banksy. There is beauty in many of these – but while I consider Picasso's Guernica to be art, it has little beauty! Beauty does not reside in the accuracy of representation or idealization of recognizable objects. Abstract pictures by Mondrian and sculptures by Hepworth are, I feel, undoubtedly beautiful – but are not representing anything but themselves. I find nothing of art in such items as Ermin's bed or in paint thrown on walls – except self-indulgence and exploitation of commercial opportunities! But occasionally a 'found' object may cross the boundary to become art by the selection, presentation and context that creates some sort of 'Hey, I not thought of it like that'.

I find much recent art in, for example, galleries as frankly a self-indulgence by the 'artist'. In many cases, but by no means all, it says nothing to me. I am not enlightened, or amused, or educated by such examples. For me, I expect the artist to be saying 'hey, look at this': this is an interesting situation, something of beauty, an exciting pattern or a surprising view of an apparently normal situation. If I do not feel that I am being so addressed, then why should I bother to look or listen? Sometimes a title will provide a clue that enables one to say 'Ah, yes – I had not thought of it that way...' If neither this nor the item itself causes this reaction then this is not 'art' to me. Other people may react differently and find a linkage - and I guess, if a

sufficient number of people (and people with whose views one agrees with or respect) find a linkage then one may discover something - or just need to admit some respect, even if it fails for oneself!

I find some exhibitions inspiring - not necessarily only in content but in the atmosphere created by the presentation. A memorable example for me was the Richard Buckle's 'Diaghilev' exhibition in London in the 1950s. The same can apply with architecture. I find the Barbican area of flats in London exciting and also the new inside of St Pancras station. While art is not in itself functional it can well be associated with function – as the Bauhaus and the London Design Centre promoted. Thus art is not a search for some 'ideal', separate from normal life, but a desirable and perhaps enlightening part of everyday life and the structure of our social environment. Art may learn from the past, but needs to be able to explore and to move forward as a feature of our developing society – and at times to fail!

In what way can a pile of bricks or an untidy bed be considered art? To me this is not art in itself as there has been no change to the form or selection of standard available objects, materials or situations. It is only 'art', possibly, by the choice by the 'artist' in the form of the arrangement in relation to likely observers. Putting it in a 'art gallery' is one way of establishing a particular relationship between the 'art' and observers. The very fact that it is so presented poses the question to observers 'what is the significance of this?'. In such terms it is not the object itself that is art but the situation and relationship to the observers. A simple rectilinear pile of identical commercial bricks shows no evidence of design, skill or choice in its form – so its only claim to be 'art' is the relationship established with observers by its situation. I find this difficult to accept as art. To me there needs to be evidence of choice, and/or interaction with the form of the components of the item, and evidence that the 'artist' appreciated how the object might interest and interact with the observer. Picasso's goat, made from a bicycle seat and handlebars, does this. Duchamp's urinal does not! However, both are good jokes! If Tracy Ermin's bed was returned to its usual bedroom location or the pile of bricks to the builder's year would they retain any characteristic of being 'art'? I don't think so!

For me, what makes art is the constructive use of coincidences or alignments. These are usually the alignment of lines or edges (not necessarily straight) but could involve colours or shapes. They draw attention to relationships between different parts of the overall assembly so that there is some coherence over 'the picture'. I think this applies to paintings as well as sculpture and photographs. The alignments between parts may 'point' to relationships or may counterpoint them. The coincidences or alignments must not be trivial – such as exact symmetry in positioning of components or over much concentration on detail in individual parts. There is thus an implication, or demonstration, of some 'meaning' to the overall image. This makes for opportunity of communication to the observer.

It is worth noting that an individual may of course pursue 'art' activities (such as painting, sculpture or ceramics) purely for personal pleasure and without aspiring to the communication function noted above. However, others seeing or hearing this work may feel enlightened or amused and it is at this audience reaction point that what was done by the individual might be considered 'art' - even if that was not the overt intention at the time.

The above considerations are basically about 'fine art' - in the sense that art is the only or the prime/sole objective of the artifact. If one considers many artifacts in life they have other prime purposes - e.g. a teapot needs to be able to pour, a poster needs to be read at a distance, a chair needs to be comfortable. The same comment applies to much religious art where the prime purpose was communicating messages. In these cases my comments at best relate to

what is added to that prime purpose that raises (or not) the artifact to become artistic. With the pottery of Clarice Cliff I feel that perhaps the 'art' at times overcame the function! In many ways art reflects the sociological conditions of its time - but is not, and should not be, restricted to this. I think that with the above caveats my comments remain relevant to art in general, not just European art – which of course is the background of all the above considerations.

July 2014