

Art is Natural

Dr Daniel Shorkend,

Technion Institute of Technology, Israel

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I explore three key “moments” in art history and theory which allow me to construct the argument that art is available to all and that participation in what it has to offer will of necessity develop individuals as well as collective societies. Art need not be defined in terms of traditional forms, nor is it especially rare and simply a gift or talent. Rather, it will be described as a natural disposition or state that we can all develop, the fruits of which are valuable and even suggest a utopian outcome.

KEYWORDS: Art’s ontology; arts value; natural; utopia

1. INTRODUCTION

In this brief article, I would like to argue that making art is a natural state that humans have access to. While theory and art history are learned and while the practice of fine art could also be formalized as a set of learned skills, that is to say, techniques, the latter’s true nature and state transcends such learning and is accessible to anyone who is open to art. I shall cite three momentous moments in the story of art which make such an argument plausible. I shall then envisage the value this may hold and argue that contrary to popular thought that social ills can be eradicated through political ranks of power, rather the simple ubiquity of art, free of any vested commercial interest and the like, is in fact a more likely candidate for the salvation of humankind. While this may sound rather idealistic and utopian, even out of touch with the brute nature of reality, it is precisely this “being out of touch” that art affords that may very well heal wounds and restore balance individually and collectively.

1. METHOD: Three “moments” culled from art history:

a. Duchamp’s *Urinal*: Art can be anything:

Duchamp’s seemingly rebellious and highly original gesture in declaring a simple *Urinal* as a work of art and thus warranting to be exhibited in the early part of the 20th century was not, I would argue, simply affirming a new aesthetic or denying traditional aesthetics. Rather, I contend that it was a philosophical and reflective gesture that motioned to questioning the very ontology of art and artmaking.

By taking a common “object” or utility and without changing it in any way (other than signing “R Mutt” – a reference that I am not certain of what Duchamp may have intended by such an act but does not deflect or counter my argument) and wanting to exhibit it as art, implied that traditional Fine arts does not define and determine what art is or what form it may take.

The implications of such an ingenious act can be enumerated as follows:

- Art need not be a skill, a craft, a technique
- Paintings, sculptures, photographs, drawings, prints are not exhaustive as instances of art or of art making
- Art need not be rare; expensive; sacred
- Art can take many forms or be any form or perhaps conceptual (this “object” now has a different function and meaning in a gallery than in a bathroom)
- It is not necessarily a talent perse.

There is also another aspect that this “act” brought into sharp focus: the apparent distinction between art and everyday life. This “object” along with others that art historians later dubbed Duchamp’s “ready-mades” suggests that the schism between art and life is not that well defined. The implications are 1) that aesthetic experience can be found potentially everywhere; 2) that art need not be about creating the illusion we call art by

traditional artistic means but the very act of designating something as art renders it so and 3) that there need not be a craft element to art.

The first means that we are enjoined to see art in all things, that is to say, either in terms of form and/or extra-aesthetic dimensions, one can broaden what art is or could be. The second suggests that art conceived traditionally is not a sacrosanct truth that remains uncontested, but rather a game with arbitrary designations as to what counts as art. The evolution of art and its different definitions and methods throughout history confirm that indeed the definition of art changes over time, often radically so as is the case from a premodern to modern perspective. Thus, one need not accept current definitions of art. The third suggests that art need not be a special skill or ability or an accomplished talent or gift but can be practiced in many ways and may develop new ways and meanings. It also means art is not the exclusive province of a select few. The “I can’t draw” phenomenon need not be the death knoll for any artistic pursuit (though if one wishes, a person could learn the skill of drawing, just as most learn an alphabet).

b. Pollock’s *drip paintings*: A personal language

Pollock’s *action painting* or *drip paintings* in the middle of last century offered a new style or technique. While one can conjecture on the meaning behind this dance-like mode of making a painting with its splattered lines and large expanse with seemingly no center, one significant aspect of this technique is that it invites the possibility of creating one’s own personal language, whether or not it coheres with the tradition of painting at any given point.

Notwithstanding, instead of seeing the creative innovation of such an approach, most “unschooled” viewers might make remarks like “my six-year-old could have done that” and feel duped by modern art and estranged from the peculiar reality that such works fetch enormous prices at auctions and so on.

However, one should embrace such remarks and perhaps maintain that Pollock liberated art from the perfunctory act of mimesis and enjoined artmaking to be open, free, and unapologetically expressive. What then might be the implications of such an “act”?

- The boundaries on method and technique are expansive and not cast in stone
- Personal mark-making and play are valuable in and of itself. As children we *all* made some kind of art – purely naturally and without discursive knowledge or understanding. Such inherent human dispositions are of our essence, despite education which often squashes the creative impulse leaving many or even most despondent when it comes to art especially where the Classical is considered the measure and ultimate standard. This, I believe is an error.
- Pollock created his own vocabulary as it were. Just as a tree grows in its own unique way, albeit following patterns and mechanistic programs, even laws, so a human being necessarily has a unique imprint which by definition then will employ and express a unique vocabulary or language of sorts, while driven by biological necessity at the same time. This does not diminish one’s uniqueness, but rather sets the parameters for infinite variation between people.
- Art embraces individuality. While pop art and even post-modern thinking might deny as such or the very opposite, embrace extreme relativism and subjectivity, I believe Pollock’s motif suggests a balance between both poles in the sense that while he devised his own radically new language and method, he also repeated it, that is, it became a style. Do we not each have a style or at least can forge one, by the very definition of individual subjecthood regardless of our social belonging or not? I believe that the answer is affirmative.
- While Pollock did not just stumble on this style but was the product of a long search that began with a kind of realism, then a form of Surrealism which became more abstract and then evolved into the *drip* paintings. This teaches – as with all prominent artists – that style, method, personal mark-making and so on – develops over time, concentrated effort and unwavering interest and practice.

c. Theory of art: No agreed standard

Philosophers and art critics down the ages have argued for various definitions and standards of art. The ancients, such as Plato attempted to define what art is or its function and excluded most art as fulfilling such a function. In fact, he was quite critical of art in general and only specific kinds of art could be considered as true art as such. For several centuries art was to become the domain of religious instruction and perhaps a form of veneration. The modern impulse changed that, separating art as a secular discipline, with its own theory, history, and practice. This led to the modern notion of the individual artist and art as a mode of inquiry and personal expression without recourse to tradition mythological, historical, classical, and religious provenance. Nature itself become subject matter in its own right and the proliferation of new materials allowed greater mimetic accuracy.

Modernism then subverted even this new approach with the rise of abstraction and the questioning of the traditional approaches of art, while aesthetics suggested that form in itself has value apart from any extra-aesthetic concerns. Art still appeared to be connected to a didactic function, each movement within modern art often producing a manifesto and the idea of the great artist, the sacredness of the art gallery and the commercial interest in art proliferated.

Standards of art, that is, what constitutes good art was never something solved and Kant's *Critique of Judgement* in the 18th century suggested that beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder and that no such objective standards exist. The seeds of modernism were now in place and this morphed yet further into what has become known as the post modern wherein the rebellious acts of modern art can be said to have arrived at its logical conclusion: There is no absolute definition of art and no necessary standard of evaluation as to what constitutes good art.

What are the implications of such a history considered and summarized ever so briefly: It means that the very nature of art is open-ended; spurs creativity and cannot be contained by discursive analysis. This means that its reach is embracing, inclusive and not determined by an authority. Such a "discipline" should thus motivate anyone with the inclination to "try it", just as sport is popular. Thus conceived, one should recall one's childhood (or at least any healthy childhood experience) wherein play and games and art were an integral part. This consolidates the argument that indeed art is natural and that this state of being need not be squashed and paralyzed by a conception of art that is limiting, whether it is the so-called school system that assesses art or the overly dogmatic schools of art with strict guidelines as to what constitutes "proper art" and proper training.

On the other hand, I do believe art is also a discursive process and that like any discipline, training, practice and learning from others, both in terms of theory and practice is useful. But only insofar as it helps form one's own individual voice and style – eventually – and yet that is not a necessary process for anyone who just wants to experience art. Art is not reserved for the "grandmaster", it is no-one's property; it is not simply an ability – it is a state, an experience and an inner drive that the world within – unique to each – might express, discover and develop. This leads, I conjecture to inner equilibrium – in line with the notion that art is therapy – and therefore I maintain making art available and part of one's "growing up" in an atmosphere that is free of judgement – is conducive to forming a better and more balanced society.

2. RESULTS

The value of art for all: Arts eventual "mark":

Art promotes being alone with self as well as social engagement. Certain arts like that of the visual arts are generally solitary affairs, while arts like dance or theatre or film are more social activities, though even in the latter case, the actor or director needs to think alone, to sit with self and reflect on the task at hand. Such a practice is crucial to develop self-awareness and inner harmony. Pascal remarked that the ills of society could disappear if only a person could sit with him/herself alone in a room. I agree with such a hypothesis and one method for achieving as such is through the play that is art.

A further attribute of art is that it fosters imaginative skill. Before the ability to reason and logically induce and deduce, it is the creative imagination that can perceive and construct hitherto unknown or inconceivable possibilities. It is this skill that has made possible the survival of the human species. And it is not rare: people naturally imagine, daydream, visualize, use symbolic thinking (we have been practicing this as children in game-playing) and enjoy the aesthetics of sport, and all manner of what is now called everyday aesthetics, suggesting that imaginative dexterity if you will, is common and natural. It is useful and productive if steered to creative ends, rather than say imagining all forms of calamities that do not exist and say fretting about the future or castigating oneself over memories and imagining concerning the past.

The ability to be alone; the ability to congregate with others in making something and the ability to use the imagination constructively converge in the hugely healthy affirmation and strengthening of the will. In this way, the individual may arrive at self-understanding and power over matter in forming and molding and shaping it according to his/her feelings and ideas. This is akin to a child who might learn a skill, say the ability to wrestle or write a word or even speak clearly for the first time and the feedback of being so understood is of tremendous import. One has said something! One has activated the will and used form intelligently to communicate and interact with reality. This is fulfilling and again it is not the domain of the few, but a basic human faculty, such as is language or a simple embrace. In strengthening the will through various modes of expression, one not only learns to manipulate and control for such may be hazardous to self and others, but to articulate and formulate what may initially be inchoate into something definitive and beautiful. Though as discussed, since the theory of

art does not yield a clear definition of art or even good art, so beauty itself, often considered equivalent to notions of good art, is itself open-ended. For art is naturally rebellious, even devious (as it looks within even into the shadow), just as each individual in essence is unique and therefore escapes the category as it were and traditional or current ideas of standards of beauty, of art.

Art is natural, precisely because it is something we all do as humans precisely because it is not art. Just like walking. Or taking a shower. Or eating. We need not even think of how we can accomplish these “feats”. It is the *isness* and suchness of being. Similarly, anyone can just doodle if one feels so inclined or trace a line in the sand or build a sandcastle or frolic in the sea. Life and art are indeed separated to the detriment of both.

3. CONCLUSION

Perhaps I could be accused of a certain premodern naivety. However, the kind of vision I am proposing, a wholesale shift in consciousness is a new paradigm beyond pre-modern-modern (and postmodern) categories and distinctions. The consciousness of the failure of modernism and its continuation, even in rebellious forms as the postmodern and the preconscious premodern, do not offer solutions to the overly technicist and overly scientific culture that are its products. Rather, we need to bring the romantic arts back into the picture, though not as the activity of the few or as an institution where money, competitiveness, pseudointellectual definitions, and power-mongering are at its center. Instead, one needs to argue in favor of an art as natural as learning the “A, B, C’s”, that it should be an integral part of the way we experience and conceptualize life, which may or may not take the form of traditional fine arts. If it does, well and good; and if it does not, then art as an idea of freedom, of imagination, of the instantiation of will, through all modes of living, may in fact create healthier, more balanced individuals. Such a paradigm shift would constitute a collective, social impact and I would argue, a more morally astute society. Perhaps then that is the true vocation of art, of life.

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