

If that's art, then my dog's a rat

An investigation into subjectivity and the role of art in modern life

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Many moons ago an artist called Marcel Duchamp put a toilet in an art gallery, called it 'Fountain', said it was art and changed the art world forever. Years later, the conceptual artist Joseph Beuys suggested that "Every man is an artist".

So where does that leave artists now? How do the general public perceive art? On what merits must we judge a piece of art?

So, let's imagine we are stood at an artist's private view, on a Friday night. We have a glass of cheap red wine and are looking at a piece of art and everyone is talking and we are wondering why we are here, apart from the fact there is free wine.

So here we are looking at a piece of art and trying to understand it:

First of all we have to decide whether or not a work is rooted in traditional representational art or conceptual art. That is, is the art geared towards aesthetic beauty and manual technical proficiency or is it geared towards an idea or concept.

So, for now let's just stick with the two initial categories – representational vs conceptual.

Representational art is art that looks like something tangible. It is what most people would call art. Art created by one person with a paintbrush, pencil or hands etc. It has its heart in traditional values, motives and formats such as canvas, sculpture and paint etc.

Conceptual art is art based around ideas. The format that projects and supports a piece of conceptual art can be pretty much anything – installation, performance and participatory etc.

So, within these two formats, considering the generic and universal terms within the sphere of art making, we can understand that maybe Joseph Beuys had a point when he said "Every man is an artist".

However, i'm not sure that's enough to end our discussion here. The statement "Everyone is an artist" doesn't really help us much, when all we want to do is appreciate what we may or may not be looking at or how to quantify it.

For example, we may be thinking - How do we know if the artist was taking his art seriously or not? Is it a joke? Is the artist for real? Is the piece of art worthwhile? What is it trying to do?

All we want to know is how to enjoy a piece of art and get the most from it. Otherwise we may be wasting our time, and life is too short to bobble about scratching our chin for hours.

What we do know, is that if art isn't there to look pretty and be decorative then there may be something profound about what is trying to tell us, and we don't want to miss out on that, do we?

Art is indeed subjective. The making of art is subjective. Every artistic decision, if not conscious is subconscious. A piece of art is always connected somehow to the essence of the artist's personality.

Everybody makes art for different reasons because everybody is different. So under this guise we could suggest that art is a representation of one person, at one point in time, in one society on this planet.

So that's cleared that up. So it's true, everybody is an artist. Not that an artist is everybody's occupation, but in that if somebody is expressing something about their life and they say that it is art, then art it must be, whether it looks like something you would like to hang on your living room wall or not. Vague I know, but hey, what can you do.

However, just because an artist has called it art, doesn't mean you have to like it. Or that you have to find it interesting.

Maybe we shouldn't simply categorize a piece of art as either good or bad, rather we should regard it's value to be gauged in whether or not it is interesting or uninteresting - once again a subjective matter.

So, within these constraints we can now suggest that the value of art is based upon an individual's personal experience and education, and that the making of art is a subjective notion, as is the viewing of art.

But this is where the idea of subjectivity in regards to judging art runs into a bit of trouble.

Subjectivity is opinion. And opinion is not fact. So if there is no fact, there is no universal truth. It is just perception. Or perspective. And perspective changes with many things. Education for one. Changing one's angle of view for two. There is no rule for all.

Another interesting idea is that a work of art isn't complete until it has been viewed. That's a bit cosmic and existential isn't it, but think of it this way:

When an artist makes a piece of work, firstly they make it within the boundaries of personal choice. Every decision made, whether it's a brushstroke, marketing ploy or delegation to an employee etc is made via an initial conscious or subconscious mode. The artist will always have a reason to make a piece of art and will go about it in their own idiosyncratic way. When the artist presents their work to the public, either consciously or subconsciously they will be aiming for acceptance of their work from a certain type of group or person. So when we consider that both the making and the viewing of the art are based upon subjective values, the artwork could be seen as a vehicle for 'artistic mating'. In this context, the work isn't complete until it has reached it's audience.

There are loads of reasons why people make art. And there are numerous ways that art can succeed or not. For example, art could be made to purposely fail. If it fails then it has succeeded. Maybe an artist could want to say something political. Maybe they just want to make a pretty picture to pass some time, in the hope it will be sold to someone to hang on a wall as decoration. You get my drift. It just has to do what it sets out to do.

So let's suggest in the grounds of confusing matters, judging art through personal bias must be plan b.

So if we have plan b, then we must have plan a.

This is plan a:

Maybe we should try to measure an artwork's worth by seeing it's relative value within the society it has been made in. I suggested earlier that "art is a representation of one person, at one point in time, in one society on this planet", so within this concept, art should be in context with it's time of conception and possibly it's physical placement ie where it is exhibited and to who etc.

So, working within the rules we set out earlier on trying to understand what the artist is trying to achieve and melding it with the concept of temporal context and your own perspective, we can start to build up a more worthy sense of whether or not, to you, the art is an interesting work or not.

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To give a different angle on such matters, I feel I should give my opinion on what I enjoy from creating and looking at others art.

For me, traditional methods of art practice such as painting, writing and drawing engage me most. That is, in my own work and the work of others. The reason behind this is pretty simple; I find it the quickest and most 'honest' way of expressing something. I enjoy the physical process of mark making and the aesthetic conundrums that arise from making compositions using line, colour and form on tangible formats such as paper or board etc juxtaposed against whatever initial idea started it all and the final outcome.

Personally I enjoy things rooted in ideas and quickness of approach rather than universally pleasing aesthetics. I tend to prefer rawness over finishedness, and like little bits of wrongness and sparks of vitality. For me it makes it human. I like freedom and exuberance. A little bit of rebellion and a big dollop of non-conformity. But with a bit of conformity thrown in for smooth running. But not so much rebellion as to make it rebellious, because then it has the tag of being a rebel. And thus it conforms to a stereotype. It just has to be it's own thing.

I'm only happy with a piece of my own art, if it looks like only I could do it. It has to be part of me. It has to be a physical manifestation of part of my persona at that point in time.

Who do I consider my audience? Well, firstly my audience is me. If it gets past me and onto another stage then I don't like my art to be totally defined as having a certain audience or not. When it comes to showing my work, as far as i'm concerned, and without wanting to sound totally pretentious I see my art as fragments of myself being thrown into nature. I don't care where I exhibit my work and I don't like it to be trapped in any expectations of status.

It's up to the 'abilities' of the work, and chance, whether or not the work 'survives' in 'nature'. However, and somewhat contrarily, and to use a gardening analogy, I am also very much aware that if you

are to place a seed and expect it to grow, you must of course understand it's nature if you want it to flourish.

Reaction wise, I guess I get real pleasure from it reaching people who don't know why they like it. I enjoy it when it confuses them and gets past what they thought was their better judgement. I like changing the perspective of people's opinion.

The main thing I appreciate in other artist's work is intellectual and aesthetic freedom, or a sense of individualism. I guess I enjoy freedom in other's work because it is a reflection of how, as an artist and as a person I want to be perceived.

I guess that's what art is really; it's a language that reflects an individual's expectations of their self, within a society at that point in time, with a view to change the audiences perspective of whatever matters are of importance to the individual at that particular moment.