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WHAT IS ART?

To say that the question “What is art?” is intimidating is, of course, an understatement. It has exercised the greatest minds in history and yet if any consensus has emerged, the claims that can be agreed upon tend to be minimal, vague, or capacious to the point of simply raising further questions. And perhaps this should not be surprising — “What is art?” is an ontological question, and ontological questions tend to be inherently flawed by the fact that they seek to establish objective fact and yet they are, inevitably, articulated from a subjective position that is ultimately inescapable. We might naturally expect, therefore, that the answer to the question will differ, at least to some degree, from person to person and from culture to culture, and will likely change and evolve over time. I would therefore be foolish in the extreme to think that I might be able to offer a more compellingly definitive answer than those august views routinely collected in anthologies of art theory. By way of an answer I could, instead, rehearse some of these canonical ideas about the nature of art, or at least the ones that sit most comfortably and persuasively with me. And I might do a bit of that. But if that were all I were to offer, the reader would be better off going to the respective sources and reading the great thinkers on art first hand. Given the partially subjective nature of any attempt to answer the question “What is art?,” perhaps a more personal and essayistic approach might be more appropriate — “What is art *for me?*,” or “What is art *for us?*” But I’m not at all sure that these questions are any less daunting....

I’m tempted, if only as a way of deferring the “What is art?” question, to speculate about why the ontological question always seems to take precedence in thinking about art. “*Where* is art?” is at least as compelling, it seems to me, and, *prima facie*, easier to answer — the sites of art appear to be culturally fairly

well assured. We might say that art is found in galleries, within picture frames, between book covers, on the stage, in concert halls, and occasionally in cinemas and on TV streaming services. But is this cultural sanctioning of artistic spaces not a little disturbingly artificial and unthinking? Do we come into contact with art only when we cross the threshold of a gallery or when we open the pages of a book? It would be preposterous to think so. And yet these spaces do have a certain power over us, which in itself is interesting. These are sites where we have been culturally conditioned to be receptive of art. We would barely notice a pile of bricks in the street and we would pay scant attention to a urinal in its usual setting, much less consider them art. Placed in an exhibition space, however (the Tate Modern in the case of Carl Andre's "Equivalent VIII;" Marcel Duchamp's original "Fountain" has been lost, though replicas can be viewed at the Tate and elsewhere) we may at least be prepared to consider them to be art. Perhaps, then, "art" resides as much in our attitude and manner of attention as it does in any object or performance, and perhaps in entering or viewing sites in which we expect to encounter art we have been sufficiently culturally conditioned so as to engage readily that particular attitude or manner of attention. If that is the case, we may consider these formal settings of art to be almost ritualistic sites that encourage the contemplative openness necessary to perceive "art" *as art*. That is to say, they play an important role in the attitudinal preparation that facilitates the "reception" of art. I put "reception" in scare quotes because it seems too passive a characterisation of a process that appears to implicate the person who experiences art in its very manifestation *as art*. And what if one were to cultivate these modes of attention and attitude independently of conventional cultural stagings of art – outside, that is, of galleries, theatres, books etc.? Could, potentially, *anything* be received as art if we were simply to adjust our attitude to it appropriately? Could the receiver, in the act of receiving, be the sole creator?

This line of questioning is theoretically valid, though intuitively we may recoil from the implications – art may require the participation of the eye (or ear) of the beholder, but it seems unthinkable to deny that *artworks* have a special, privileged and necessary status as organons of art. But what grants the artwork this special status? A pond covered with water lilies may be aesthetically pleasing – beautiful even, and perhaps arrestingly so – but surely we would hesitate to call it art? However, we have no such hesitation when it comes to assessing Monet's *Water Lilies* paintings. This would seem to suggest that artworks *are art* precisely because they are *works* – the manner of their execution foregrounds *artifice*. One might say that the entire history of art in modernity is characterised by a gradual increase of focus on form and medium, and a corresponding decrease of interest

in representation, for precisely this reason—it is an indication of a dawning cultural and artistic understanding that the *art* of art lies primarily in the materiality of the artwork. A radically compressed version of this development might arguably be seen in the developmental arc of the oeuvre of James Joyce, as he progresses from the relatively transparent language of *Dubliners* to the thick linguistic materiality of *Finnegans Wake*. And the fact that the work is the work *of someone*, a form of human expression, also seems significant. Is part of the experience of art the sense of human “communing” or the shared existential testimony that it carries? The sense, that is to say, that one is participating in a kind of dialogue with a creator, sublated to the level of the figurative and the affective? AI-generated artwork may currently be challenging these broadly humanist assumptions, but whether it is poetry-generation programs¹ or *DALL·E 2*,² human input remains, even if merely at the algorithmic level of the encoded parameters or learning patterns designed to ensure that the resulting text appears literary, or the resulting image appears artistic. A vestige of cultural symbolic exchange and understanding still characterises the experience of AI-generated artwork, in other words.

One may conclude from this that even if art remains tied to the artwork, the latter is not some static thing—it is a mobile and mutable anchor to a particular kind of dialogic experience that it simultaneously engenders, a site of wonder, of contestation, and of the uncertain settlement of cultural consensus. And so the “Where?” and “What?” questions merge....

Perhaps other alternative lines of enquiry can shed a little light on the “What?” question too? One might ask “Why?” of art. This is variety of the “Why something rather than nothing?” philosophical chestnut, and is equally fathomless. Engaging in “art,” expressing and representing ourselves and our experience on a figurative plane, is simply part of what it means to be human. From *The Venus of Willendorf* and the cave paintings of Lascaux to contemporary Insta-poetry, it is what we human beings do. We know no other way. More provocatively, one might ask “When was art?” The past tense is of course unsettling, suggesting, as it does, that art is a thing of the past (one may be reminded here of “the end of art” thesis often ascribed to Hegel in a woefully unnuanced manner³). Another – less dramatic – way to think about the “When?” question is in terms of

¹ Such as, for instance, Google’s *Verse by Verse*, last accessed August 21, 2022, <https://sites.research.google/versebyverse>.

² *DALL·E 2*, last accessed August 21, 2022, <https://openai.com/dall-e-2>.

³ It is a travesty of modern philosophy that Hegel’s contribution to aesthetics, represented most magisterially in the 1200 pages of his collected lectures on fine art, should be so frequently and so easily reduced to the four-word pronouncement of “the end of art” or, worse, “the death of art” (a phrase he never, in fact, used).

our subjective experience of art. Might art *be* for us, most potently and completely, at a particular period in our lives? Perhaps when the excitement and impressionability of youth are balanced by the sense of profundity and worldliness that comes with age and experience? That is, when we are experienced enough to perceive and understand the symbolic codes by means of which art is created and received, but also young enough to be powerfully moved by them?

And must we be moved? Is art *art* if it leaves us unmoved, unchanged? Adorno might say that art that leaves us unmoved isn't art at all, it is entertainment.⁴ For him, art is disruptive and unsettling. It challenges us, disturbs us, forces us to rethink and reconsider. It is therefore politically subversive, since it is anathematic to stasis and the status quo. But is this not to claim too much for art? Despicable people have had a profound appreciation of Beethoven and, alas, remained unchanged and despicable. And though few would deny that the "Mona Lisa" is art, how many, standing in front of it at the Louvre, or at least as close to it as the inevitably jostling crowds allow, can truthfully say they are moved or unsettled by it? Perhaps Auden was right, poetry (and here we can read "art," for Auden was playing on the etymological origins of poetry as *poiesis*, the drawing-forth or *production* that might be said to characterise all art⁵) "makes nothing happen." It is, instead, a "way of happening"—processual rather than teleological.⁶

Alas, none of these reflections seem to resolve into any sort of conceptual certainty ... which, in a way (as Kant well understood⁷), is much like art itself. It engages us, sets us feeling and thinking, invites us to linger, but does not substantially resolve into anything other than the protracted, lingering aesthetic contemplation that it prompts.

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⁴ See, for instance, Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1944], trans. John Cumming (London and New York: Verso, 1997), and Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9 (1941).

⁵ See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" [1935/36], in Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001).

⁶ W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 82.

⁷ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1987).

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