

# FOR 'ART' TO BE 'ART', IT HAS TO BE STRANGE & DISTURBING

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'Art' is an elusive quality which some artworks mysteriously possess. It means they are strange and disturbing. Any artwork that isn't strange and disturbing, isn't art. It's as simple as that. Art has nothing to do with aesthetics, or skilled craftsmanship. Art is something special.

How can we possibly arrive at this, given what even informed people normally think about art ?

What follows here is not a definition of art by decree. Nor is this some kind of art manifesto. We are not saying this is how art should be, or could be, but how it is, if you let go of the prison of aesthetics, and follow an infinitely more interesting conceptual trail. This is about uncovering and identifying an approach to art which avoids the triviality of sensory-based aesthetic theory and moves instead towards exploring the

experiential worlds that art presents us with. And this approach is not about diminishing the sensory enjoyment of artworks, but about placing them in a much richer context, where they can work a far greater magic.

For most people, whether artistically informed or not, art is all about aesthetics<sup>1</sup>. It's all about the finer feelings, and lofty thoughts, and vague theological yearnings, brought on by certain sensory perceptions. It is about educating and refining these feelings in accordance with ideas of beauty, truth, love, and sublimity. It is about being educated enough to delight in cultural subtlety, and delicacy, and nuance. Fine art is Rubens, Michelangelo, Mozart, Swan Lake; that sort of thing. The appreciation of classical fine art is also closely associated with spirituality, and if not directly contiguous with spirituality, certainly a wholesome gateway to it.<sup>2</sup>

But ever since the arrival of modern art – surprisingly long ago, in the 1860s - this very self-enclosed and somewhat claustrophobic tradition has been under attack. The values and methods of high culture have been called to account, and asked to justify themselves. It doesn't often happen like this. And the attack – coming from a loose assemblage of renegades and bohemians; a most unlikely bunch imaginable - has been both formidable, and sustained. The assault has also been oddly protracted, going on and on without result, neither side ever close to total victory, and both sides often copying one another's style and methods, and combat still regularly taking place more than a hundred and fifty years after the first skirmishes.

Which means this attack on high culture is still with us. But it would be a mistake to see it as no more than an age-old conflict between the legitimate powers that be, and unqualified insurgents. It is much more than that, because by subjecting cultural dogmas to scrutiny, it not only renewed and reinvigorated every single art form without exception, it also brought to light the fact that, in the right hands, artistic creativity can extend well beyond constant subservience to aesthetic sensitivity, and include the creation and exploration of entire worlds of imaginative experience. It's not that art never had this capacity before - of course it did, it was there from the start - it's just that the conflicts of the modern era has brought it into plain sight.

The advent of modern art meant that art had a new focus of attention. In other words, in order to truly appreciate modern art, you are forced to go beyond the aesthetic sensations of art object itself, and take an immersive, imaginative plunge into the world it is revealing. It is not enough to focus on the sensory qualities of a work, and to judge it by that standard. If you do that you miss the point entirely, and might as well not bother engaging with modern works at all. And for many aesthetes, their sensuality refined to a high camp tizzy by a lifetime of opulence, encompassing swooning in front of sumptuous Giotto's and Rubens and Canaletto's, and gasping at cherished arias at the opera, and savouring the finest of finery in wines, silks, and witty conversation, the idea of having to contemplate a whole new perspective on the arts has proved hugely difficult, if not impossible.

There is another stumbling block in the final run up to 'art' itself, and this one is quite fierce. It is not enough simply to create an experiential 'world' with your artistry, because, in a way, everything calls up a world of one sort or another. Every object of any kind always sits in some sort of 'context', and this context is its 'world'. As Heidegger said<sup>3</sup>, a painting of a pair of old boots unavoidably refers to the world that those old boots are situated in, and anyone seeing the painting would be enticed into a kind of

reverie – a speculation, if you like - about that world. Of course any enticed fantasies and speculations about the boots may be wholly incorrect<sup>4</sup>, but the point is you can't really avoid thinking them: objects can't exist in a vacuum, so the world they exist in always accompanies them.

But the ordinary world – the world we already live in – in all its forms, from the utterly mundane and boring, to the most spectacular and extraordinary, is the 'given' as a context for any crafted presentational material. It is the 'assumed', and the 'known', and the base facticity for everything. Nothing especially interesting or significant is achieved by pointing that out, or by making a special reference to it: it is the obvious.

So if an artist, through their art, makes reference back to the ordinary world we already live in, they have not achieved, in the object we are trying to appreciate, anything special, or suggested anything in addition to what we can ordinarily see. Crucially, this means that the entire focus of our attention has to come to rest on the artwork itself, and on its very tangible attributes and features, including an acknowledgement – an appreciation of - the technical accomplishment that these attributes display. There is nothing else for us to direct our attention to; it is those features, or nothing. This is the basis for aesthetic appreciation.

The ordinary world is implied in all simple presentations; you don't have to point that out. However, if your presentation points to, or implies, or actively represents, some other kind of world – and not a variant of the one we already know – then something interesting takes place in your perception, and in your imagination. You find yourself at the threshold of an unknown, and you have to make a decision as to how you will proceed. If you are repelled by what you see, you won't take it any further; if you are sufficiently beguiled, you will want to know more, and you will want to experience more of what appears to be on offer.

'Flowers in a vase' by any Sunday painter implies a certain cosy existence. So does [Still Life with Apples](#) (1898) by Cezanne, although perhaps with an added rustic edge to it. The ordinary world, with a positive gloss to it. [Napalm Girl](#) (1972) by Nick Ut presents you with the horrors of war which, were you confronted with them directly, may be more dreadful than you could deal with. But it is the same ordinary world, this time with a negative gloss to it. Distressing, and hard to think about it may be, but it is not coming from a zone with which you are not familiar; it is not otherworldly. All three of them accomplished presentations, in their own way, and of varying standards of technical expertise; yet none of them qualify as art. They are simply examples of crafted material.

[Study for Crouching Nude](#) (1952) by Francis Bacon, on the other hand, is a glimpse into a different kind of realm from that which you could ordinarily encounter. It is an invitation to a strange and disturbing zone - or imagetic realm - not subject to ordinary considerations. As a painting, it forms part of a collection of similar works by Bacon, and taken together they represent a testament to this strange and disturbing region he has uncovered, or created, or borne witness to. It is a definitive example of 'art'.



**Arthur C. Danto, philosopher of art, at work<sup>5</sup>. His bewilderment, like that of his fellow art theorists, was the direct result of an inability to see art in any terms other than as a matter of aesthetic and technical accomplishment. Fortunately, 'art' is infinitely more interesting than that.**

## Mission statement

What we want to do is define art in a simple and straightforward way such that anyone can understand it; such that anyone wandering into a gallery, or happening upon an art programme on TV, or picking up a catalogue raisonné, will find themselves well equipped to make basic, informed judgements as to what is in front of them and - just as importantly - what to do next.

The basics of a definition of 'art' have already been outlined. It now remains to go over them again, this time in more detail, attempting to substantiate and illustrate each point in a systematic manner. However, this will remain only a sketch. A full account would take at least a book, if not longer. And it is likely that even then there would be a number of grey areas which would not be satisfactorily explained, and accounted for. This is inevitable. But the determination here is to get away from the kind of philosophical stupidity which fails to contribute to the big picture, and wastes valuable time and energy obsessing with irrelevant detail<sup>6</sup>.

## Art is primarily, in its essence, a form of theatre

What any artist - as opposed to any craftsman - is basically saying is, 'Please join me in exploring the world I have uncovered.' This is vastly different from an encouragement to appreciate an example of elegant design, or the display of magnificent classical technique. An artist is transporting you into a different world; a craftsman is asking you to stand back and admire their crafted work.

Naturally enough, art shares with all crafted material certain presentational conventions. The difference between what eventually becomes art, and that which remains crafted material, is the fact that the crafted material of art is about the theatrical creation of a fictional, imaginary world which the viewer needs to enter if they are to experience the art. Other forms of crafted material which do not employ theatrical conventions, like decorative, ornamental and design-based crafts, do not attempt this.

How do we join the artist in an exploration of the world they are inviting us to enter? It will help if we start by identifying and describing the exact process whereby an artwork 'announces' itself, and comes into being. Then we can see quite clearly how this very deliberate and decisive presentational moment can meaningfully be said to connect – and unite – such diverse objects and forms as a urinal<sup>7</sup>, a painting, a shark in a tank<sup>8</sup>, a video, an unmade bed, a performance, a soundscape, as well as any other conceivable item or form that can be put forward in the name of 'art'. This is because art is not about the medium in which it is expressed – which could be any presentational medium of any kind - but about the theatrical moment which calls for a break with ordinary thought and invites the audience into a form of entertainment.

But if art begins as a form of theatrical entertainment – and therefore operating according to the basic laws of theatrical performance – it is theatre which only becomes art at a certain point in its evolution. Before that, it shares characteristics with other theatrically based presentational media, such as films, or performances, or happenings, but is still not yet quite art. To become characteristically art, it must somehow exhibit very special and specific additional qualities which will set it apart from other presentational material of similar origin.

And the most specific and irreplaceable quality of art is its ability to disturb and unsettle. Art is always and only about the strange and the disturbing; it is never about the familiar and the ordinary. This doesn't mean that the familiar and the ordinary can't be the subject of art forms; obviously they can, but they are never 'art', they are simply forms of presentational material, crafted according to the techniques relevant to the medium in which they appear. In other words, an item of presentational material only becomes 'art' if it arouses a sense of the strange and the disturbing; if there is nothing strange or disturbing about it, then it is not art, it is simply an example of crafted material in its chosen medium. A play, a book, a film, or a painting which remains within the parameters of ordinary - or even extraordinary – life, is just a play, or a book or a film; no matter how profoundly moving it might be. But the moment any one of these presentational media finds a way to awaken a sense of the strange and the disturbing, it becomes a work of art.

The best thing about art is that, as a form of theatre, it always remains a kind of enjoyment, even when it is exploring imagined worlds of unimaginable dread. Theatre is not reality; it is a dramatization of reality, and an enjoyable – agreeable - way to explore it, within a benign setting. There is always a safe distance – an agreed buffer zone - between any art object, and the viewer. It may be true that those who are drawn to extreme forms of art – snuff movies, Marquis de Sade, [Whitehouse](#) – have a predilection for the actual worlds that these dramatisations only imaginatively represent, but that does not detract from the main point, which is that 'art' is an entertainment.

## The features of the theatrical 'moment'

What follows is a basic ontology of art, following its development from the moment of its inception to its fully-formed characteristic state. This may look to be some sizeable remove from looking at artworks in a gallery, and that this only complicates the situation, not clarifies it. But the point is simply to establish that art begins and evolves in a different way to decorative or designed items of craft.

'Art' – as exemplified in an artwork - always begins with a simple 'call to order' – a formal (or implied) invitation to engage with the material - as happens with the start of any narrative drama. The artist invites the audience to 'look at this', or to 'listen to this', or to 'pay attention to this', and then he or she presents some kind of material for the audience to consider. The presentation material may take any form, either as a traditional medium, or as something new and unexpected. It may be a picture, or a piece of music, or a noise, or a bizarre performance, or a video, or anything at all. The artist directs our attention to presentational material in the theatrical announcement, and then the artwork is able to reveal its content. A pile of 'found objects' reveals itself as a sculpture, strange gestures become a narrative, random noises a soundscape. Or more usually, a series of marks on a canvas announce themselves as a painting.

The theatricality of performance art, or video art is straightforward enough, but why include painting, sculpture and art environments, which look to be static in nature, and a long way from any kind of theatre ? Where would you find a theatrical 'call to order' with a gallery painting, or a sculpture ? It is implicit in the conventions of gallery attendance; painters implicitly invite you to direct your attention to their work, even if this invitation is easily overlooked – forgotten - in the absence of someone to deliver it to the gallery-goer in person. What we are saying in effect, is that a painting, or a sculpture, is a piece of static theatre; a lobby card, if you like, for an experiential realm located elsewhere.

## Where 'art' diverges from other crafted material

Now we need to make it very clear that it is not the theatricality which makes the art, it is the choice of strange and disturbing subject matter. Theatricality is not of itself strange and disturbing; most of the time it is the very opposite. So an additional quality is needed to differentiate art from non-art, and this is where the identification of a particular subject matter comes in. Yet we should not forget the value of the idea of the theatrical context – that is, the theatrical presentation of materials for contemplation - which underlies - and links - what might appear to be completely unrelated and irreconcilable artworks, from paintings and urinals to performances and unmade beds.

The concept of 'presentational material' is key to resolving all confusion as to the diverse, contradictory and paradoxical 'things' presented as objects or events in the art world. Anything and everything which an artist deliberately puts forward – declares - as an artwork amounts to an item of presentational material. But on its own, the mere fact of something being 'presentational' doesn't tell us very much, as every conceivable thing in the universe has an aspect of 'presentability' to it. What makes it informative and instructive in relation to the matter of art is that an 'art' presentation is additionally and essentially theatrical, and an invitation to a certain type of disturbing enchantment. Of course much crafted material – fine art paintings, decorative sculpture, objects of utilitarian design – is also presentational, but these objects are not intended to be



theatrical, they are meant primarily to please the eye, by exemplifying some aspect of a notion of beauty. And 'art' goes yet one step further, beyond the merely presentational, and the merely theatrical, into the realm of the strange and the disturbing.

**How does the idea of the theatricality of art help us better understand it ?**

By explaining that an artist creates a world, not simply an object, or a series of objects. And by emphasising that art is essentially an immersive experience, as is theatre, and not merely an aesthetically sensual one, limited to an appreciation of form and technique. The artworks that an artist creates are able to link up collectively to form a whole very much greater than the parts; and the collective whole, if it is strange and disturbing, becomes 'art'. The strange and disturbing world that the artist has brought to life then flows backwards into the individual objects, giving each one of them an entirely new significance, so that they need to be interpreted in an entirely new way.

The particular course of development just described is only one way in which the quality of art can manifest itself. Occasionally a single object, quite different from others by the same artist, can manifest this quality, and effectively amount to an art object on its own, in splendid isolation from its fellows. This is unlikely, but not impossible. More likely, art begins to appear in the works of a certain artist, and they are able to explore it further by creating works of similar content. The possibilities are endless. But, to repeat, and drive the point home: 'art' can only occur in circumstances where an artist has created an imaginary world of sorts, and an imaginary world can only be created, in a fictional setting, by following theatrical conventions.

**Issues, and further substantiation**

Exploring experiential worlds is vastly more interesting and rewarding than looking for beauty, truth, love, sublimity, and objects pleasing to the eye. When all is said and done, aesthetic mysticism – the quest for aesthetic rapture, and 'transcendence' through art - is a surprisingly trivial affair.

We have tried to show how even astonishingly diverse artworks – in their basic aspect as mere presentational material - are in fact essentially connected by their deliberate theatricality, and how this theatricality can be further subdivided into art and non-art, with art being very distinctively one kind of thing – the strange and disturbing - and non-art (or craft) being everything else.

But even if we've solved the problem of finding the link between diverse artworks, as well as finding a way to track the evolution from generic theatrical presentations to those which qualify as 'art', we seem to have done so by avoiding the whole issue of aesthetics. In many people's minds, art is all about aesthetics, and any supposed solution to the problem of art has to be about solving the problem of how to find a convincing aesthetic theory which somehow not only explains the diversity of material posing as art, but also offers some means of telling the good from the bad.

**Art & aesthetics**

It has to be said up front that the strict identification of 'art' with aesthetics is simply mistaken and confused, as well as an intellectual and interpretative dead end. It is trying to illuminate an interesting experiential capacity using the wrong methods. This is illustrated by the fact that philosophers and theorists who have gone this route –

while giving it their best shot - have invariably found themselves horribly lost in space, and having to resort to grotesque admissions of defeat such as the 'institutional theory', which proposes that art is basically whatever stuff an art institution will put on display. The whole realm of aesthetics – the education and refinement of finer feelings, and Pavlovian responses to canonical works, often accompanied by a simpering worship of classical technique – is much more trivial and superficial than aesthetes can be made to admit.

Aesthetics is all about setting up opportunities for aesthetic mysticism - from a simple gasp of delight, to full-blown rapture and transcendence - the logic being that rapturous sentiment at sumptuous fine art can be relied upon to generate high-minded, refined, highly-educated thoughts of a classical nature, replete with high cultural references, yet this is simply not the case. Ecstatic sentiment doesn't entail high-minded scholarly thinking, any more than taking drugs entails worldly motivation: the two are not linked. Aesthetic thoughts are best applied to crafted works with a manifestly decorative and ornamental purpose – much of classical fine art is never more than this – and not to works which require thoughts of an immersive, experiential, exploratory nature.

### Limited nature of this definition

It must be apparent by now that, when all is said and done, the strict identification of 'art' with the 'strange and disturbing' proposed here is absurdly limited in its scope, because it fails to take into account the huge outpourings of emotion inspired by artworks, while not making any effort to include these in the overall enterprise. People want their emotional outpourings to be granted massive priority, and any definition which fails to respect this will be resisted to the very end. This is surely true, but in rejecting the value of aesthetic emotionalism - as a conceptual basis for a definition of art - we are not preventing people from responding to art any way they like, we are merely relegating emotionalism to the realm of aesthetics, where calibrating sensual responses to crafted material is the appropriate way to proceed. Nothing has been lost in doing this, while an immense new experiential category - the 'strange and disturbing' – has been brought into light and accorded a valuable explanatory role.

From another angle, this might all look to be only about who has the right to use a certain word, namely 'art', to label what they think art is. The aesthetes – and they must be in the overwhelming majority – want the word to describe those objects that set off their rapturous sensitivities; and whatever other arguments might come along, they are plainly not going to accept them. They are going to want to keep the word 'art' for themselves. Nothing we can do about this, other than to point out that the traditional identification of 'art' with aesthetics offers so much less clarity and explanatory power than the account being proposed here.

And a word regarding 'strange and disturbing' as a classification: this is not as constricting a category as might first appear. In terms of primordial experiential capacities, 'familiar and reassuring', and 'strange and disturbing', are as basic a set of polarities as you can get. More or less everything can be seen in terms of one or the other, meaning that 'art' has a vast range of possibilities in which to express itself.



## Judging art

The more unsettling the object, the better the art. Any work which is not strange and disturbing, no matter how provocative and shocking it might be, is not art. By the definition in this essay, this would offer a route towards something like an objective standard – or at least an objective description – because it is not based on whether you like the work, or not. ‘Strange and disturbing’ also has nothing to do with emotions like disgust and repugnance, or being sickened and nauseated. Negative emotions are part of everyday life, and do not necessarily indicate the presence of the strange and disturbing. David Lynch’s film *Eraserhead* is art; Tracey Emin’s installation *My Bed* is not. Lynch gives us an entire immersive world; Emin gives us a theatrical prop. And even if you took the entirety of Emin’s creations, and treated them as stills from a single film, or as props from a single play, you would not find anything strange and disturbing there, only self-confessional material of a sexual and psychological nature, illustrated by means of crafted presentational material. This doesn’t mean that Emin’s craft is in any way ‘bad’ at what it does – which is promote herself and her experiences in a theatrically illustrative way – merely that it doesn’t amount to art.

Obviously there is much more to assessing and interpreting art than simply applying blanket judgements like these. There is also the question of the way an artist orchestrates their works; bringing out certain features under certain circumstances. And art, like anything in life, can be paradoxical, so that what appears to have a certain characteristic now, can take on a different characteristic later. Art can also work retrospectively, so that something that has appeared entirely innocent in the past can, thanks to the way an artist repositions themselves, become something sinister and unsettling in future.

### Positively strange

‘Strange and disturbing’ doesn’t necessarily always involve a descent into darkness and negativity. Andy Warhol managed to create a very disturbing sociopathic, high camp, uber-theatrical, affectless universe using – amongst other props – bright and cheery everyday advertisements, and commonplace, user-friendly household products. Jeff Koons may be trying to achieve the same effect with the puzzling – almost stultifying – vacuity of his sculptures<sup>9</sup>, but at this time of writing it is not clear how successful he is in this, or even if this is where his work is going.

This is where informed and perceptive criticism can play a crucial role. By delving into the mysteries of the world which an artist creates, and illuminating its characteristic features, the critic can make the whole encounter with an artist’s work more interesting for the rest of us. There is some room for aesthetic considerations as well, but they are superficial in comparison with an elucidation of the world which an artwork makes reference to. You can tie up the aesthetics of a Brillo box in a few paragraphs; a Rembrandt and a Raphael in a page or two – neither account would be particularly interesting – but even a half-decent phenomenology of the Warholian universe would need volumes, and it would be a good read. Once again, you don’t have to like the world that Warhol gave us to be able to acknowledge his extraordinary achievement in presenting it as something that could be experienced as ‘art’.

## Summary: from theatrically crafted material, into art

'Art', to differentiate it from decorative and ornamental crafts, as well as from forms of elegant utilitarian design, as well as from anything else which might look like art but which is not, is primarily a form of theatre.

Theatre is a deliberate invitation extended to an audience by an artist/performer to enter into an imaginative entertainment, by means of some kind of structured performance, following theatrical conventions well understood in advance by both parties.

In order to present his or her creation, an artist makes use of a presentational medium, in other words, their chosen art form.

What differentiates 'art' from any and every other kind of theatrical presentation, is its subject matter. 'Art' is strictly limited to presentations which are strange and disturbing. All other presentations, following theatrical conventions, are best simply described as examples of the medium in which they are presented: a play, a ballet, an opera, a piece of music, a novel, a painting, a happening. But if any one of these presentational forms manages to find a way to arouse a sense of the strange and disturbing, it becomes 'art'.

## Summary: how to approach gallery art

When going into a gallery to view works by an unknown artist, the first serious set of questions has to look something like this:

- What are these works inviting me to do ?
- Am I meant to focus exclusively on their aesthetic and technical qualities ?
- Or is the artist presenting me with an experiential world beyond aesthetics ?
- If it's an experiential world, is it just a variant of the world I already know?
- Or is it somewhere strange and unsettling ?

It is not always possible to answer the key questions about an artist's created world on a single visit to a gallery. In fact it's most unlikely. You will surely have to investigate further, by reading around the subject, and watching documentaries, and following your intuitions. And certainly hunting out other works by the same artist. Alas, further research seldom includes listening to an artist's own account of their exertions, as artists can be inarticulate and shallow, demeaning their own work in the process. They like to believe that their bohemian lifestyle and professed creativity outweighs any intellectual shortcomings they have, as well as conferring enormous value on their cliché-ridden musings<sup>10</sup>. More to the point, they themselves often have not the least idea what their work is all about. Forget the artist, the musician, the actress. You have to explore the evidence of the works themselves, wherever it takes you.

## Summary in plain language:

Art is not about aesthetics, it is about the strange and the disturbing, presented theatrically, as an imaginary theatrical world you are being invited to explore, through one or more of any number of very diverse presentational media: paintings, music, opera, ballet, video, performance, sound, mime, whatever.

Art is meant to beguile, and to fascinate, but it has to be of a certain order of fascination and beguilement: the disturbing, the unsettling. Ordinary theatrical fascination is just plain fascination; unsettling theatrical fascination is art.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> [Aesthetics defined in Wikipedia](#) as is a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of art, beauty, and taste, with the creation and appreciation of beauty. It is more scientifically defined as the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values, sometimes called judgments of sentiment and taste.

<sup>2</sup> For example the works of Roger Scruton.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger: [The Origin of the Work of Art](#)

<sup>4</sup> Cf [Ken Wilber on Heidegger](#)

<sup>5</sup> Photo in the possession of the Andy Warhol Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Anyone needing evidence of just how misguided and unhelpful philosophy can be when it comes to art, try Lamarque, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Duchamp [Fountain](#) (1917).

<sup>8</sup> Damien Hirst [The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living](#) (1991).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Jeff Koons [Michael Jackson and Bubbles](#) (1988), and many others.

<sup>10</sup> For an entertaining example of this, with both famous artists and the presenter himself wallowing in specious tripe, see the video by Robert Hughes [The New Shock of the New](#) (2004).

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