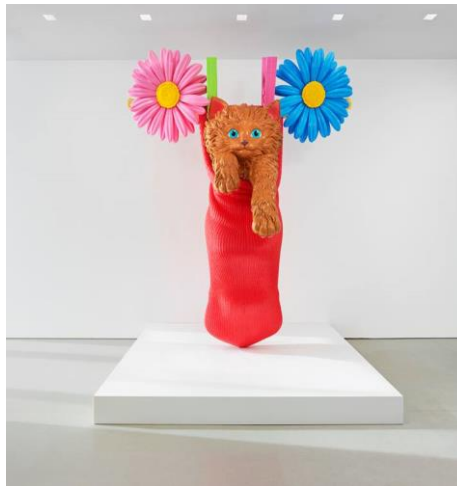


WHY DO WE NEED TO DEFINE 'ART' ? BECAUSE IT GREATLY ENHANCES THE ENCOUNTER WITH ART ITSELF

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Modern art has yet to be properly explained and given its own distinctive and authentic philosophy. It is almost always portrayed – openly or subliminally – as if it were somehow striving for much the same objectives as classical art, though perhaps by very different means. This has the effect of making modern artworks look slightly ridiculous in comparison with the grandeur of their classical counterparts, at the same time as making it an uphill struggle to try to argue the case for their supposed value.

The whole problem stems from the fact that modern artworks cannot meaningfully be judged by classical standards, and from classical perspectives, yet there doesn't readily seem to be any other way of going about it. If 'art' is not about beauty and form, and sublime technique, then what on earth is it about? How do we tell the dross from the gold? One popular solution has been to propose that modern art is all about 'interesting ideas', and getting you to 'see things differently'¹, but this just reduces art to a specialised form of brainteasing, perhaps an advanced form of classroom 'show and tell', with artworks as puzzles to be decoded, and chatted about. For many people this is as good as it's going to get, and they are happy with it, but for those who suspect there might be very much more to 'art' than mere visual riddles and interesting shapes, this whole approach is vaguely depressing, in that it reduces art to a pastime, and means that it's essentially a trivial affair, and only something you think about when you have nothing better to do.

Surprisingly, there is a way out of this mess. There is a way to define 'art' such that it not only shows art to have its own distinctive purpose and method, clearly differentiating it from crafting that is 'not art', it also explains why modern art is so very different from its classical counterpart. The principles of art can be elucidated in simple and straightforward terms, offering a convincing explanation as to what modern artworks are trying to do, yet without diminishing their numinous power. And along the way, it will also show how easy it is to tell the difference between good art and bad.

Our account hinges – at least to begin with – on appreciating the very sharp distinction between ‘aesthetics’ – meaning crafted material designed primarily to appeal to the senses – and ‘art proper’, meaning crafting with a wholly different purpose. Aesthetic crafting is about creating and fashioning works which strive, usually by means of highly specialised and refined technique, to achieve physical representations of ‘beauty’, and ‘magnificence’, whereas ‘art proper’ is essentially narrative, and often involves elements of narrative theatre.

Classical art is wholly concerned with the representation of a certain kind of splendour, such as can be realised by exceptional – usually academically acquired – technique. It is all about appealing to the immediacy of sense experiences, even when made to appear lofty and cerebral. Despite the fact that our aesthetic capacities can be educated and refined – and some even accord them a spiritual dimension – they remain essentially sensual, and there is nothing inherently spiritual about responding to sensual excitation, no matter how seemingly exquisite.

Put slightly differently, classical art is essentially ‘decorative’, and ‘ornamental’ in the sense that it is concerned with beautifying. Classical artworks ‘embellish’ and ‘enhance’ our lived world in a very immediate, sensual fashion. They are designed – within certain narrow parameters – to ‘look good’, or ‘sound good’, and it is their sensorial appeal which is crucial to the way people assign value to them. And the more powerful the sensual effect of a work, the more people are likely to accord it a mystical quality, revealing something of a perceived direct relation between certain sensory responses and a supposed idea of spirituality.

All this changed with the arrival of modern art. Artists began presenting works which appeared to have no conceivable connection with traditional form and content – other than the fact that they were displayed in galleries and public spaces – and this was accompanied by a very real sense that all recognised standards of artistic meaning and purpose had been abandoned. Art appeared to have descended into a free-for-all, and the whole enterprise had, from the traditional perspective, lost its direction.²

But what exactly had happened ? We know that, historically speaking, readymades in particular were greeted with the same scepticism and bewilderment they are treated with today, which means in effect that there was nothing in traditional theory which could cope with them, and explain them in a convincing way, other than to dismiss them as not proper art in the first place, and therefore ultimately just a kind of intellectual joke which inadvertently revealed the limits of aesthetic propriety. In other words, presenting absurdities as ‘art’ served to reinforce the fact that real art was oil paintings and classical sculptures and orchestral music, and all the rest was nonsense, albeit light-hearted student fun, and really only good for a laugh³.

Yet treating modern ‘transgressive’ artworks as intellectual musings failed to shut the modern movement down, and led instead to the idea of modern art as being all about ‘interesting ideas’, and getting you to ‘see things differently’. This meant that there was something expressing itself in modern art which was ultimately more insistent and more powerful than the opposing idea that it was a waste of time, but this did not stop the establishment of an equally powerful suspicion that what was on display was shoddy and opportunistic. A visit to a gallery – preferably accompanied by a class of lively schoolkids – would be an exercise in giggles and scorn and bewilderment, expressed in a plentiful supply of predictable observations, most of which have now entered folklore: ‘You call that art ?’; ‘I could easily do that’; ‘My cat could paint better than that’; ‘How can this rubbish be art ?’; and so on⁴.

All of which tells us that the conceptual categories of classicism are of no help when it comes to understanding modern art, and that they inevitably lead to the kind of dismissive tomfoolery with which gallery goers are familiar. And the problem is made worse by the fact that this misdirected silliness is not restricted to the ignorant – people with no real interest in art – but extends to many traditionalist critics, and beyond them to many artists themselves, who, not

really knowing what they are up to, incorporate jokiness and fatuous gimmickry into their works, thinking that it is somehow part of the plan, and hoping that it will link them spiritually with Duchamp.

So we are in a peculiar situation. Modern art – from readymades to installations to performances to slapdash paintings – has been around for more than a hundred years, yet no one – neither artists nor critics – is quite sure what it is about. There are plenty of theories, and manifestoes, and declarations, but none of them could be described as remotely persuasive. So the question remains: is it possible to set modern art on its own substantial footing, according it a value equal to that of the classical, while putting to bed the idea that it is all a great – and not especially amusing – student prank ?

If classical art is essentially decorative and sensorial – what we have termed ‘aesthetic’ – and modern art is clearly not that, then what could it be instead ? The possibility that it’s about ‘thought recalibration’ and ‘seeing things differently’ has a certain weight to it, and this of course allows for endless speculative critical commentary, and although much modern art might prompt you to think ‘what the hell is this supposed to be saying ?’, very little of it even makes the slightest effort to make you ‘see things differently.’ The fact is, most of modern art is straightforwardly ‘presentational’ – declamatory – and hardly ever attempts to go beyond that.

This declamatory, theatrical aspect is pointing us in the right direction. Because we can now see that modern artworks are not essentially ‘aesthetic’, they are essentially narrative. They are meant to represent gateways – entry points – to a ‘story’ of sorts, and in order to appreciate their significance, you have to be able to pick up on the narrative they are trying to convey. In this way, modern artworks are like theatrical props, or stills from an immersive film, and the artist is inviting the viewer to join them in their ‘world’, and share in their particular perspective and vision. They are – to extend the metaphor – like distinctive pieces of furniture, or distinctive mementoes, which, as soon as you see them, bring to mind a whole environment, and even a whole way of thinking. The more successfully an artwork can convey you into the world they represent, the better the art.

For example, Andy Warhol prints have very little to commend them aesthetically. There is something mysteriously shallow and flimsy about them, as if to say, leave your sensitivities at the door. But if you know the Warhol world, with its celebration of drug addled sociopathy⁵, you know how powerfully a Warhol artwork symbolises and represents that world, and how effectively it can conjure it up, and immerse you in it. Warhol’s artworks are like his thoughts made flesh, and while they make little sense aesthetically, they are narratively potent.

This might sound like ‘art is about ideas’ or ‘art is about seeing things differently’ simply dressed in slightly different clothes. But this is not that. This is explaining that modern art operates on narrative principles, and that this narration is a type of theatre. Modern artists are inviting you into a narrative environment, not trying to get you to ‘see things differently’ or think of some ‘interesting ideas’: of course nothing is stopping you from doing all that as well, but that is not the principle purpose of the art.

Another example: a lump of fat in a vitrine is not meant to be contemplated as you would a Canaletto, and by classical standards makes no aesthetic sense at all, but when you realise that it represents an entry point into a strange and fascinating ‘Joseph Beuys world’⁶, then you can disregard the aesthetics and instead follow the Joseph Beuys ‘story’ you are being presented with. Artistic narratives are not straightforwardly linear in the way films or novel plots tend to be, with a beginning, middle and end, characterised by key events, but they conform to the same presentational logic, where you are meant to understand that the narrative is infinitely more important than the features of the vehicle used to convey it.



We are already familiar with the idea of creating an ‘environment’ or a decorated landscape by artistic means, and ‘art as narration’ is just an extension of that. Modern artworks, on their own or as a group, represent the creation, by an artist, of a theatrical environment in which the viewer can immerse themselves, at least vicariously. And it is this theatrical setting, specific to each artist, which is the real locus of the ‘art’, not the aesthetic features of the artworks themselves. The ‘art’ of Andy Warhol is not a single Marilyn print, or a Brillo box, or any of his works analysed aesthetically, it is the totality of the theatrical world he created.

Again, modern artworks function exactly like theatrical props. And because these props are crafted primarily to create an environment, and an atmosphere, and an immersive presence, they don’t need to display features of classical aesthetic technique. They are not meant to be viewed as standalone items of sensorial beauty; they simply need to be able to bring to mind a certain world, and in this regard very subtle information can be conveyed using extremely crude material. This explains how found objects and bits of litter can be used to represent complex realms that have nothing to do with their aesthetic or decorative shortcomings.

Modern artworks establish a ‘scene’, and then it is up to the strength and coherence of the ‘world’ created – or revealed – to drive the narrative forward. This is where the difference between good and bad art can be found: good art takes you into the strange and unknown; bad art leaves you where you started. Warhol and Beuys invite you to join them in realms of imaginative experience you would never have known about had you not encounter their art; lesser artists experiment with this and that but are unable to create distinct worlds of their own.

There is another element which is crucial to ‘art’ being distinctively and characteristically itself. This concerns the specific type of narrative revealed by an artwork, or artworks; this narrative has to be essentially ‘strange and disturbing’, meaning that it is of a manifestly different order to any kind of ordinary and everyday narrative, such that we regularly encounter in normal life. Our everyday world is obviously full of narrative information of one sort or another, from narratives of life and work, to narratives of death and destruction. These ordinary and familiar ‘stories’ are not worth representing and exploring as ‘art’, in that we already have access to them in other ways, whether we pay them much attention or not. ‘Art’ on the other hand, offers us the opportunity to engage with realms of imaginative experience with which we are not ordinarily familiar, and as such it offers us its own distinctive type of vicarious adventure. The worlds that artists offer us need to be sufficiently distant from anything we might ordinarily encounter if they are to warrant our special attention, and for this to be the case they would need to be characteristically ‘strange and disturbing’.

‘Strange and disturbing’ does not necessarily mean disgusting, or horrific, or frightening, or any variant thereof. Nor does it necessarily mean different or unusual. ‘Strange and disturbing’ is a combination of the fascinating and the unsettling, and it is a realm of imaginative possibility

which some artists are lucky enough to be able to exploit. Francis Bacon captured it in his paintings; Andy Warhol in the totality of his theatrical lifestyle; Joseph Beuys in the concrete representations of his biographical mythology.

To summarise: modern art is wholly narrative, and often employs theatrical methods. All non-narrative presentational crafting is not 'art', but rather sensorial 'aesthetics', and concerned with representations of 'beauty'. For art to be uniquely art, as distinct from all other forms of presentational crafting, it has to display narratives which are characteristically strange and disturbing. Art is a vicarious, recreational engagement, not to be confused with spirituality or mysticism.

It is important to emphasise that not all attempts at narrative presentational crafting rise to the level of 'art', as defined here. In fact, only a very small percentage do. Most of what passes for modern art is merely experimental crafting of one sort or another: very colourful and interesting and all the rest of it, but not art. 'Wacky' and 'zany' and 'cutting edge' are not characteristics of 'art', but of experimental crafting. It is just not that easy to produce work which generates an authentically strange and disturbing narrative, however much you might want to, and however slavishly you imitate the grand masters. There is only one Francis Bacon for every ten thousand painters of distorted grotesques, just as there has only ever been one Jimi Hendrix.

The definition of 'art' presented here is useful and practicable in a very straightforward way. Once understood – and this does not take much effort – it can be applied immediately to any instance of modern art, with immediate effect. Does the work contain a narrative? And not just any narrative, but one which is strange and disturbing? The conceptual trail may require further investigation on the part of the viewer, but if the strictures of the definition are kept in mind, the facts ought to reveal themselves sooner rather than later, and the quest for art itself should, by its own account, avoid descending into thoughts about 'resonances' and 'interesting ideas' and 'seeing things differently'.

'Art' becomes much more interesting if you know what you are looking for, and can tell the difference between an unsettling narrative and empty rhetoric. You can dismiss a lot of the famous, wildly expensive, and colourful junk for the sensational 'nothing-in-particular' that it really is. Abstract art, for example, with very few exceptions – and this doesn't include Rothko or Pollock – is not 'art', but decorative crafting. And accepting the distinction between 'aesthetics' and 'narrative art' is relatively easy to put into practice: Jeff Koons, the king of peculiar, is an artist; whereas wacky and zany Damien Hirst is not; Sarah Lucas has something strange to tell us, Tracey Emin doesn't; Richard Long yes, Andy Goldsworthy no.

Summary:

- Modern art is essentially narrative, and often employs theatrical methods; classical art is essentially sensorial and aesthetic.
- Artistic narratives have to be 'strange and disturbing' to qualify as 'art' proper; all else is merely aesthetic, experimental or narrative crafting.

Endnotes:

¹ There are many books which can teach you how to treat modern artworks as opportunities for 'resonances' and 'decoding'; see for example Heller (2002), Acton (2010), Ward (2015).

² See for example Spalding (2003).

³ See for example Sewell (1994) & (2012).

⁴ Nicely semi-satirised in Elia's 'We go to the gallery' (2014).

⁵ Shore (2016) for 'The Factory' and the people; Warhol (2009) for the art.

⁶ Tisdall (1979) is a good start.

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