

A NEW CONCEPTION OF 'ART'

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Abstract: The traditional conception of art is about sensual beauty and refined taste; modern art on the other hand has introduced an entirely unexpected dimension to the visual arts, namely that of 'revelatory narrative'. Classical art aspires to present works which can be appreciated as sensually beautiful; modern art, when it succeeds, presents us instead with the unsettling narrative. This radical difference in artistic purpose is something relatively new, and not yet fully appreciated or understood.

What is art? Art is popularly believed to be any example of 'creative crafting', from flower arranging in the home, to classical oil paintings in museums. Anything crafted with a touch of creative flair is considered 'art', and this is contrasted with mere skilled technique and mere practiced craftsmanship. For 'art' to lift itself above mere 'craft' – in an everyday sense – the crafting has to be flavoured with something like a dash of stylish magic.

Though when it comes to classical artworks – of the sort we encounter in museums – we are not so much looking for creative flair as for evidence of classical technique, meaning the kind of fine workmanship possessed only by those of exceptional talent. And the more we are in awe of the technique on display, the more we believe we are in the presence of real 'art'. So our everyday concept of 'art' combines the idea of creativity with a respect for classical technique, though it's not quite clear from these two slightly differing concepts exactly what it is that the concept of art is trying to tell us; and for that we have to turn to a more encompassing idea, that of representing 'beauty'.

'Beauty' – in artistic terms – is all about sensual attractiveness; in other words, it is about the attempt, using the possibilities afforded by a particular art form, at realising something sensorially 'beautiful', whether in visual or auditory form. We experience the beauty of art through our senses, even when that beauty is supposedly linked to lofty ideals and spiritual musings; if you took away the sensual aspect of classical art, nothing would remain.

And in this way 'art' – as a sensual experience – can usefully and illuminatingly be equated with 'taste' – meaning one's ability to appreciate the nuances of sensual experiences afforded by presentational material. 'Taste' is of course also about food; and the refinements

involved in the preparation and presentation of food offer us yet another means of understanding the essential sensuality underpinning a traditional conception of 'art'. We educate and refine our experience of food in exactly the same way we educate and refine our experience of classical artworks; that is, by isolating and exploring their constituent elements, and learning optimal and ever more subtle ways of engaging with them. And the logic of beauty and taste – the logic of sensual experience relating to presentational material – can in turn usefully be categorised under the label 'aesthetics'.

Restricting beauty and taste to the category of 'aesthetics' allows us to introduce a quite separate category into the realm of presentational material, namely that of narrative, and specifically that of the revelatory or unsettling narrative. This is the realm of 'art proper', and its logic and general direction is quite distinct from that of aesthetics, and other forms of sensuality.

Now the truth is that the conceptual logic of 'sensual aesthetics' is wholly unable to explain modern art in any meaningful way, leaving us with an unhappy choice: either that modern art is essentially rubbish, or that the critical apparatus being applied to explain it is not up to the job. A popular alternative to the judgement that 'modern art is rubbish' is to propose instead that it's about 'interesting ideas' and helping us to 'see things in a different way'; and this allows critics to engage in freewheeling, plucking so-called 'resonances' from all over the place to 'explain', or at least to give some kind of interpretation to, a seemingly slapdash modern artwork. But 'interesting ideas' is a subset of popular discourse and reflective philosophical chatter – not art - and modern art becomes even worse than rubbish if we are reduced to getting our 'interesting ideas' from the sight of unmade beds, and shark tanks, and readymade urinals. Presumably the 'interesting idea' is that any old junk can be made to qualify as classical art, and so be exhibited in the same buildings, but there's something vacuous and disheartening about this whole line of thought, and it makes art out to be an astonishingly trivial affair, a kind of classroom 'show and tell' for adults with nothing better to do.

A convincing solution is that modern art is not about the aesthetics of beauty, or about interesting ideas, or getting us to see things differently, but is instead a form of narrative, in the same way that an object in everyday life can present a narrative of varying degrees of complexity and fascination. For example, if you live in a building full of different types of people, you very soon come to learn how simple objects, positioned in certain locations, like on the front steps, or on a hall table, can come to represent a whole world of experience, and a whole way of thinking, and even a whole outlook. The object could be a pair of gloves, or a set of keys, or a scribbled note, or a package of some kind, and depending on our engagement with them, they can have a compelling story to tell us, involving mentalities, and intentions, and intersecting histories. This has nothing to do with the aesthetics of the object – its physical beauty or lack of it – but with its narrative value: lumps of fat and felt, for example, have no classical aesthetic merit, and make no sense as attempts at classical beauty, but they have massive currency as narrative items in the world of Joseph Beuys.

Modern art therefore becomes a matter of connecting with the narrative represented by the modern artwork. The aesthetic features of a modern artwork are irrelevant: it is all about the type of story it can tell. And in artistic terms, there are two major categories of narrative; the ordinary and reassuring on the one hand, and the disturbing and revelatory on the other; ordinary narratives leave us exactly where we started; revelatory stories unsettle us and show us something with which we are unfamiliar.

Narrative arcs of the sort we find in films and novels are, for the most part, restricted by the limits of the form they are presented in, and so tend to be somewhat self-contained: a film ends with its credits, and a book ends with its last words. But a modern artwork can be part of a much larger, ongoing narrative – something like an evolving performance – in which the entire life of the artist gets incorporated into their art, as is the case with the art of Andy Warhol. To understand his art, you have to connect with the narrative of his entire artistic life, not just with the aesthetics of a single Brillo box, or a Marilyn poster.

Of course it needs to be emphasised that not every presentational object has a valid artistic story to tell. An unmade bed, unless it can tell us something we don't already know, is just an unmade bed; it may well be a glorious instance of self-aggrandisement, and an iconic symbolic referent, but it has no artistic narrative value. Likewise a shark in a tank. What about a giant metal balloon dog? Jeff Koons is orchestrating an utterly fascinating world of banality and emptiness and absurdity – and perhaps even hopelessness – the like of which Samuel Beckett could only dream of. Koons's art is post-Godot, if you forget the aesthetics and follow the story. Some of these artistic narratives may well take an effort on the part of the viewer to latch on to, but once reached, have a compelling luminance of their own, infinitely more substantial and interesting than the camp swoonings of the aesthetes.

More on this:

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