

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND MODERN CONTEMPORARY ART, ENJOY IT, AND NOT BE FOOLED

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## Abstract

Modern contemporary art remains a mystery because most people – including art critics and even artists themselves – are unable to see beyond the imprisoning confines of classical fine art. Everything is judged in terms of beauty and technical skill, when it should be viewed from a quite different perspective, namely that of the imaginative world that the modern artwork is a part of. Successful and authentic modern art is about creating worlds of the imagination - like a film, or a novel - only this time using different media. Modern artworks are like lobby cards and film stills to imaginative worlds, and they should not be seen as aesthetic ends-in-themselves. And for an artwork to be authentically artistic, as opposed to merely crafted, it must invoke a 'strange and disturbing' imaginative world, not a variant of the world we currently inhabit, as that world is the world of crafted and aesthetic objects.

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## Introduction

Modern art remains a mystery to most people – critics, artists and the general public - even after 150 years. This is because everyone believes, deep down, that ‘art’ is really the same thing as ‘classical fine art’, and they find it almost impossible to judge what they see from any other perspective<sup>1</sup>. But there is another way to get the real point of modern art, and it does not involve complex logic or mental gymnastics; it simply involves understanding that what authentic modern art is trying to do is quite different from what classical fine art is trying to do, and that judging modern art from a classical point of view is like judging ‘swimming’ from the perspective of ‘guitar playing’: the two are not related.

If you want to understand modern art, you need to understand that, unlike their classical fine art counterparts, modern artworks are basically signposts to imaginative worlds which the artist has uncovered, or discovered, or created – whichever word seems most appropriate. A modern artwork is not really an end-in-itself, to be marvelled at for the manifest technical skill it took to realise it, or the beauty it manages to convey; it is instead more like a film still, or a lobby card, symbolising, or referring to an imaginative experience. Modern artworks are like the words on a page in a novel; you can savour their physical shape if you want to, but their real gift is to transport you into an imaginative realm, in the same way that a good book can, only this time modern artworks employ different media - like paintings or sculptures or performances - and they are obviously orchestrated differently as well.

For example, if you see a work by Andy Warhol, you should not get stuck on the physical details in front of you, such as whether or not much skill has been involved in their execution, or even if the work seems to say little other than ‘Coke’ or ‘Brillo’, or ‘famous face’. These basic facts are not the ‘art’; the ‘art’ is the Warhol world in its totality – the strange, sensational, high camp, consumer product worshipping world that Warhol created and celebrated – and once you realise that, you see how the individual artworks only really make sense when placed in their larger context, and how much more powerful and interesting this larger context is than any individual artwork, no matter how iconic it has become.

You don’t judge a book by its physical features; you don’t even judge it by the quality of its prose; you judge it by the power and force of the ideas it is able to express, no matter how badly they may have been worded. Nor do you judge a film by the quality of the equipment used to record it; you judge it by the strength of its storytelling, even when the acting is terrible and the camerawork clumsy. In the same way, you don’t judge a modern artwork by classical fine art standards; rather you look to see where it wants to take you, because it is the destination that is the art, not the medium used to get you there.

And there is one further essential quality that ‘art’ requires for it to be characteristically ‘art’, and not merely something crafted and designed. This is the quality of being ‘strange and disturbing’, which effectively gives art its own distinctive domain, and helps differentiate between that which is magnificently crafted, and that which is properly a work of art. The ordinary world that we currently inhabit is the world of crafted and designed objects, from the very crude to the most magnificent, and this includes all types of decoration, and all forms of entertainment, because one way or another, they all start from, and refer back to, the world that we currently inhabit. But if a crafted object is capable of giving us access to an imaginative experience which is strange and disturbing, then it shifts from being merely crafted, and properly becomes an example of art<sup>2</sup>.

This short study is determined to be useful and informative, at a very basic level. It is grounded in the very simple and straightforward idea of being able to wander into an art

gallery, and getting the most out of what you see. It will not rely on complex definitions and subtle distinctions, as they only cloud the issue, which is clouded enough as it is.

### Plan of this study:

We begin with a very general analysis of the way people – including critics and artists themselves – think about art, in order to show some of the tensions that exist in our common conceptions, and how these tensions lead to a persistent confusion – and misdirection - that comes to be reflected in much that is written about art.

Then we trace the basics of aesthetics, from the idea of sensual beauty to the idea of a transcendent aesthetic experience, in which a crafted object is contemplated and enjoyed for its magnificence alone, irrespective of any other function it may have.

From there we can look at the concept of modern art itself, as we understand it, showing its peculiar emergence in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a possibility that artists themselves could not fully have appreciated at the time, and which has taken decades to evolve to the point where it has clarified its own distinctive features, such that we can clearly distinguish ‘art objects’ from ‘craft objects’.

Finally we can apply this new conceptualisation of art to assessing the work of some famous names, with a view to coming to some useful and instructive conclusions.

As has been said, this is all about finding a way to let modern art speak for itself, and in such a way that does not involve conceptual gymnastics, or arcane logic. If we have identified something substantial, then, once properly grasped, it should start to take on qualities of self-evidence, and not require endless justification. It should be plain for all to see.

### What do people think ‘art’ is all about ?

Speaking generally, when people think about art, they think about classical fine art, in all its forms. They think about sumptuous museum pieces when it comes to painting and sculpture; and they think about classical music and opera, ballet and classical theatre when it comes to performance. Classical works are predicated on the idea of long training, and demanding techniques, and exacting standards of execution. And from the perspective of an observer, classical standards are relatively transparent, in the sense that, provided you have a certain amount of education, you can quite easily tell at a glance whether someone has achieved a certain standard of excellence, or not.

All of which means that when people go into art galleries, they do so with a certain amount of expectation, and a certain eager capacity to judge according to classical standards, even if they are more than willing to be surprised. If they go into an art museum, such as a national gallery, they are likely to have their expectations fulfilled, but if they go into a modern art gallery, they are likely to be confronted by material they find difficult to assess. This is the essence of the problem we face with modern art.

This may seem a surprisingly simplistic starting point, yet it is not. Art criticism is regularly infused with the sense that the problem with modern art is that it is a shoddy affair, with no real standards, no real direction, no real coherence, and that people are getting away with murder<sup>3</sup>. And even educated people still wander around galleries muttering phrases like ‘I could do that’, or ‘I don’t get this’, or ‘My four year old niece does things like this’, or ‘Is this art ?’, and ‘What’s this supposed to mean ?’ Modern art is disparaged because it seems to be trying to make fools of the audience, and many people like to think they can cut through the silliness and state the obvious: modern art is mainly garbage. Which means, in

effect, that modern art is all but invisible when viewed through the lens of classicism; and also that something has gone terribly wrong somewhere.

We could move straight on to correcting the misdirected gaze that people have towards modern artworks, but there is also a need to explain why and how it is that the concept of 'art' causes so much confusion, and why it seems to be saying different things to different people at different times. We need to be able to understand at least some of the major tensions pulling the meaning of the word 'art' in different directions, leading to the current situation where people have more or less given up on the idea of trying to define it, except in a very clumsy and unhelpful way<sup>4</sup>.

### **'Art' has at least two conflicting meanings at the same time**

When we see, for example, a mundane action which we consider sublimely executed or crafted – perhaps an expert sushi chef filleting a fish; or an experienced player shuffling cards – we express our delight and wonderment at these moments of sublime technique by declaring 'Wow ! That's real art !' What we are saying is that the displays of technique have transcended mere technical efficacy and practiced method, and become something marvellous in themselves, irrespective of the mundane function they fulfil, and perhaps even because of it. And fully implied in our re-categorisation of these events as 'art', is the belief – even if we think we are joking – that they should be considered as of the same order as fine art, and skilled musicianship, and the like.

This is 'art' as supreme craft, and the idea fits nicely with the broader idea of art as essentially classical fine art. But there is also the idea of 'art' as having to do with a kind of ungovernable creative force which finds expression through an 'artist', who is characteristically bohemian and counter-cultural, and given to emotional extremes, and possibly mental distress. The alcoholic or drug addicted loner, working feverishly through the night on some bizarre project known only to themselves, is a well-known stereotype. And this angle on 'art' is further reflected in the idea of 'arthouse', meaning cinema which is difficult and provocative and deliberately stylish, and which goes against the mainstream, and flaunts convention. This is 'art' almost as the polar opposite of classical fine art, in that it understands art as undisciplined and dangerous, though this is somewhat paradoxical in that the artist has to have quite a bit of discipline and self-control to channel these dangerous forces if they are to be turned into artworks in the first place.

So we end up with a situation where we have classical fine art – the art of orderly museums, sedate drawing rooms, corporate foyers and expensive auction houses – apparently being produced by people who are channelling dangerous forces of inspiration, and who can't be relied upon for anything other than their artworks. Which means that the public are both happy to give artists plenty of room to misbehave, provided they produce the goods, and happy to judge these goods by classical fine art standards.

### **The basic logic of aesthetics**

Aesthetics is concerned with the physicality of artworks, insofar as they reflect ideas of beauty and nobility. So aesthetics is interested in the effects artworks have on their viewers, insofar as they can be traced to the very tangible physical features on display. Aesthetics is about the relationship between beauty and truth and nobility, and the extent to which these characteristics can be said to be present in an artwork. Aesthetics treats artworks very much as ends-in-themselves, as self-contained objects, to be studied and appreciated for their perceptible qualities. In other words, given the fact that we are talking

about a whole range of responses, from the subtle to the gross, aesthetics is interested in the idea that what you 'see' – perceive sensually - in an artwork is what you ought to get.

Aesthetic theory can be said to be the house ideology of classical fine art. Historically speaking, it emerged out of the study of the relationship between crafted presentational material and the effect it had on its audience, and it would inevitably have become bound up with traditional and conservative ideas as to what constituted the 'attractive' and the 'well-made'. Then there would have been an ongoing development, over the centuries, of trends and styles, and improvements in technique, all taking their cue from what had gone before, and all striving to achieve some kind of aesthetic excellence.

Now the basic logic of aesthetics, as it relates to the production of art, is that good art is about the application of good technique, and that to be a good artist you need to master traditional skills. You cannot paint like Raphael by dabbling on a Sunday with your friends, and you cannot build something like Chartres Cathedral by mucking about with tools in a garden shed. More to the point, anyone can tell the difference between fooling around, and the serious stuff.

### The transcendent aesthetic object

The sheer range of presentational art forms, and the sheer range of possible responses to them, make aesthetic theory something of an unsatisfactory affair when it comes to binding everything together and explaining what art is supposed to be in itself. All we really have at this stage is the idea that beautifully crafted objects – paintings, sculptures, performances – are art, and they are art because they are manifestly beautiful, and manifestly the result of extraordinary technical skill. 'Beauty' and 'truth' are of course extremely nebulous ideas, relative to taste and predilection, and don't really bear much examination; you either get them, or you don't, and this leaves us locked into a somewhat narrow circle of ideas, which may work quite nicely to explain what you see in classical art museum situations, but are useless in an encounter with anything modern.



**Raphael *The Small Cowper Madonna* (1505):  
classical realist technique reaching transcendent heights**

But the concept in aesthetics which has had most appeal when it comes to unlocking the secrets of art, is that of the ‘transcendent aesthetic object’<sup>5</sup>. This is basically any crafted object which has been so magnificently realised that one is, as it were, stunned into contemplating it for its magnificence alone, irrespective of any function it may fulfil. The artwork seems to lift itself out of worldliness into a kind of otherworldly realm; in other words, it becomes transcendent. This is most commonly experienced in encounters with large scale classical paintings – by say Titian, or Tintoretto - where the level of technique is so astonishing that you are swept away in wonderment at the achievement itself, even if you dislike what is depicted, and are unmoved by the idiom.

These transcendent objects are the mainstay of national galleries, and they have the effect of justifying themselves, and acting as the last word on crafted material. They are the gold standard by which crafted objects are judged, and their quiet authority seems to put an end to speculation as to what real art might be. And in the light of the ongoing confusion as to what art really is, there is something very pleasing about the simple equivalence between classical museum pieces and art itself.

### The arrival of modernism<sup>6</sup>

Now the trouble starts. As soon as it became clear – in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century - that it might be possible to create artistically in ways that do not depend on classical parameters, something very unexpected confronted the conventional understanding of art, and no-one knew quite how to respond to it. In effect what happened was that an utterly new and unforeseen realm of artistic experience was, as it were, ‘opened up’, or discovered, or uncovered – whichever term seems most appropriate – and it has taken more than a century for the true nature of this new realm to reveal itself to the point where it can meaningfully be articulated and discussed, and, more importantly, appreciated. Given what this new artistic dimension has shown us about ourselves, it is not surprising that many people are still not sure that they care for it.

The precise historical details of the evolution of modernism are not important, and can be studied elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, but we can hold to a very general picture of the emergence of experimental changes in painting styles, such as Impressionism, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, leading up to the arrival of Dada and Surrealism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And of course the key event is Duchamp’s decision to exhibit his readymade urinal sculpture *Fountain* (1917), the ramifications of which are still with us today.

Yet there are quite a few points we need to remember, if we are to have a reasonably accurate understanding of the deeper implications as to how modernism has evolved. And these are not that easy to grasp right away, because they involve undercurrents which very much contribute to the ongoing confusion about how modern art relates to classical fine art. For example, our definition of art is predicated on the idea of art being about the strange and disturbing imaginative world which contextualises and gives meaning to any particular modern artwork, but such a world has to exist in the first place if an artwork is to be more than an empty gesture, and this is often not the case. And although Duchamp’s readymade became a decisive moment in the whole process of the emergence of modernism, it is not clear that, at the time, the sculpture itself amounted to anything other than mischief making and a rebellious playfulness.

Looking back, however, we can see that Duchamp, despite his own efforts to the contrary, most certainly did create a disturbing imaginative realm that gave his artworks meaning, even if this realm was peculiarly cerebral and dehumanised. But the point is that we might not have known it at the time, because Dadaist mischief making was extremely

hard to read, and things were happening that only revealed themselves in the light of subsequent events. It is more than likely that Duchamp himself had no idea of the significance of his actions, and these actions might just as easily have been swept aside by the forces of conservatism - and come to nothing - rather than become milestones in a new artistic dispensation.

## The key feature of modernism

Unquestionably the most important characteristic of modernism is its democratisation of art, meaning that you no longer had to produce works according to the demands of classical style, meaning in turn that works were not only 'easier' to produce, but also that more people - that is, people less technically competent and talented - could produce them. At one level, this amounts to a lowering of standards; at another, it is the opening up of possibilities which were previously denied by the constraints of conservatism.

Why didn't Cézanne paint fruit like Cotán ? Or at least try to ? There is ample evidence that Cézanne took his technique as seriously as any old master, and was wholly dedicated to whatever it was he thought he was trying to achieve, but the undoubted strength of his allegiance to his obsessions doesn't - and can't - tell us either how close he came to realising his objectives, or how to judge these objectives relative to anything else. Judged by classical standards, Cézanne's apples are laughable failures, but judged by different criteria, you can come to other conclusions.

Judging abhors a vacuum, so if the standard orthodoxy is toppled, something must take its place. We are now 'educated' to think of the big names in Impressionism as quasi-classical, or perhaps classical-in-waiting, and an educated eye knows how to 'like' Picassos and Cézannes and Van Goughs, as if they were somehow as demanding in their realisation as the technical demands of a Tintoretto. But what's happened is that we've discovered that there is more to painting than the rather dead hand of classical realism, and that simple visual delight invariably trumps dull worthiness, no matter how incredible the worthy technique. So even though we know that standards have been lowered, or abandoned, or shelved, the visual arts are suddenly much more fun.

Yet, if we stay for a moment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we're still in the realm of crafted objects, where artists strive to produce works of transcendent beauty. We will have to wait until the arrival of Dada before it becomes clear that beauty could be supplanted by another aspiration altogether, this time that of 'bizarreness' or 'oddness', or 'dada', or whatever it was the Dadaists wanted to convey. And once beauty is replaced by something else - in the Dadaist case something much less familiar to most people as properly characteristic of art - the conceptual floodgates are opened.

But having opened the conceptual floodgates - which in real terms amounted to a second major breach of orthodox defences, the first being the advent of non-classical styles of painting such as Impressionism - it becomes almost impossible to know what 'art' is supposed to be. Classical standards of the depiction of 'beauty' - cohering around classical realist technique, and a range of appropriate topics - at least allowed the viewers to orient themselves, and gave them the ability to tell the difference between work of a high standard, and everything else. But if these standards are removed, and you can paint, sculpt, compose and perform any way you like, and on any subject you like: who's to say where art begins and ends ?



## Interpreting modernism

We may seem to be talking in very general and in very casual, non-technical terms, but in fact we are focussed on the very heart of the problem of modern art. There is no point making the situation any more complex than it already is, or swamping it with art-historical and academic jargon. It is all about the cataclysmic transition from a classical orthodoxy to an open-ended free-for-all, in which the free-for-all seemingly failed to establish its own clear standards of interpretation and judgement, leaving critical thinking on art in chaos.

As we have already seen, the first phase of the critical response to changes in painting styles involved the broadening of our aesthetic range, and learning to like bright colours and shapes on their own account. Colour and shape literacy is now considered a great skill, and those who are able to produce colourful artworks with confident regularity – the element of regularity presumably neutralising the possibility of accidental creations – are considered modern masters; there is no other way to explain the esteem with which say, Matisse, or Howard Hodgkin, or any number of others, are held.

The aesthetic shift here is from awe at technique, to simple visual delight. But from Dada onwards, visual delight was no longer predicated on colours and shapes, but on juxtaposition and absurdity. This quickly led to the idea of intellectualising interpretation, whereby an artwork is treated as if it were a series of visual clues, to be, as it were, psychoanalysed and decoded<sup>8</sup> by those with requisite skills and education. And as a simple rule of thumb, this means that those artworks which seem to inspire reams of interpretative prose are better than those which don't. Salvador Dali, good; Andy Warhol, bad.

Lingering in the background, however, is still the perception that real art is not about shapes and colours, urinals and unmade beds, but classical paintings, especially of the kind found in national museums. All the other stuff may be fun, but it's not the real deal. There is a genuine justification for the sense that standards in the plastic arts no longer exist, attested to by the unanswerable argument that no one who can paint like Caravaggio or Rembrandt is going to languish forever in obscurity, overlooked by dealers, critics and the public alike; whereas even schoolchildren can come up with something like a Matisse, and millions of Sunday amateurs have the skills of a Van Gogh, or a Cézanne. If you do succeed as a modern painter, it won't be because of your undeniable technique, or skill with colours and shapes, it will be for something else altogether, something that has nothing to do with your talent; sheer good luck, perhaps, or your agent.

## The emergence of 'art'

At this stage, all we have learned from modernism is that the classical notion of beauty, as the principle object of aesthetic contemplation, has been overthrown, and replaced by the idea that any quality at all will do. In terms of the abandonment of classical technique, this amounts to a straightforward free-for-all, in which any conceivable object can be presented as an artwork. And this is the precise conceptual point at which we appear to be stuck. Dada and Surrealism are all very well, and a good laugh, but they very quickly lead to arrangements of bricks (Carl Andre), and tins of shit (Piero Manzoni). Is this really all there is to 'art'?

Now we already have a complete conceptual system and vocabulary relating to crafted objects, from the ordinary to the sublime, and this is 'aesthetics'. Aesthetics is about the sensual impressions generated by contemplating the physicality of crafted objects, and aesthetics relates to everything from the most primitively crafted objects, to those of transcendent beauty, insofar as these objects are designed, one way or another, to be

physically appealing. But beyond the concept of beauty, and elegant design, aesthetics runs into the sand, and we need something more profound to take its place, if we are to come to grips with modernism.

'Arthouse' cinema gives us a clue. The most underappreciated quality presentational material currently possesses, is its ability to fascinate and disturb, although this is exactly what people are looking for in arthouse cinema, and what they expect to find there. And the ability to fascinate and disturb is not as limiting a possibility as might appear at first glance, because it can extend to a range of situations, both positive and negative in character. It does not have to limit itself to the weird, or the grotesque, or the disgusting, or the frightening; and in fact these qualities are not as fascinating and disturbing as one might think, because the truly fascinating and disturbing extends to levels deeper than shock value.

What we are saying is that, insofar as presentational material is able to manifest the quality of being strange and disturbing, it qualifies as 'art'. Nothing else does; everything else is 'craft'. Being strange and disturbing is the essence of what an artwork should be, in contradistinction to material which is merely crafted, no matter how expertly. Crafted material is subject to the conceptualisations - and judgements - of aesthetics; strange and disturbing material is properly the realm of art.

### Putting this conception of 'art' to work

So we have the aesthetics of beauty and elegant design for crafted objects of all kinds, including painting, sculpture, performance, music, and literature, and anything else that can be presented as crafted, and we have a theory of art, centred on the necessity for artworks to be characterised as strange and disturbing. The reason why we don't call this an 'aesthetics of art' is that artworks have a fundamentally different relationship to their audience from those of crafted material, in that artworks point to a larger contextual world in which they have meaning, whereas crafted objects are ends-in-themselves.

As we have said before, artworks relate to their essential meaning in the same way words on a page relate to theirs. Artworks are symbolic, and referential, and representational. They are part of a bigger picture, like theatrical props, or film stills, or lobby cards. They themselves are not the 'art', because the art is the totality of the world of which they are only a small part, even though they can come to symbolise that world in a very potent way.

This is quite different from crafted material, including transcendent aesthetic objects, because in the case of crafted material, you are explicitly supposed to concentrate on the sensual qualities immediately before you, and appreciate the magnificent technique that went into their realisation. Artworks on the other hand, can be powerfully symbolic and referential without possessing any indications of magnificent technique, and can even achieve their purpose with a deliberate lack of aesthetic and technical skill. This is the reason why you cannot possibly understand a work of modern art if you try to view it from the perspective of classical aesthetics: you are simply trying to compare apples with urinals.

### Method in modern art appreciation

What does all this mean, then, for our committed gallery-goer, who wants to get the best and the most out of modern art? It means in effect a complete change of approach and perspective. You have to look at artworks in a different way. Forget about trying to be ravished by colours and shapes, or by astonishing technique. There is no point standing in front of a Joseph Beuys and trying to achieve a state of aesthetic mysticism, as you might with Monet's waterlilies, or with a Rothko, or with a Tintoretto. Modern art is not about

dazzling you with beauty. It is about your having to inform yourself about the 'world' which the artist may – or may not – have managed to create, and then seeing whether the artwork achieves an appreciable level of referential luminosity, or not, as the case may be. The relationship between modern artwork and the created world which gives it its meaning will not be the same in every case, and on some occasions it will be up to the viewer to supply much of the missing information; on others, a lot of it will be there in front of you.

Some of the most successful modern artists have wanted to include their own personae in their created 'art world', as an integral part of the whole performance. This is true of Andy Warhol, Gilbert and George, and Joseph Beuys. Others, no less powerful, did not: Francis Bacon, Sigmar Polke. Some, like Cindy Sherman, and Gregor Schneider, are half part of their creations, and half outside of them; there are no hard and fast rules as it all depends on the way the artist decides to orchestrate their material.

More importantly, not every attempt at modern art is successful. We might even go so far as to say that only a tiny portion of modern art qualifies as genuine 'art' by our definition. This is a difficult point to make, because it can appear to undermine our case, in that if much of modern art is not really up to the standard of art, what value our original conception? The fact is, we are dealing with two mutually exclusive trends in crafted material which appear, at one level, to share the same platform, and this leads to a confusion even amongst artists themselves. All art, even by our definition, starts out as crafted material, but at a certain point, thanks to a greater contextualisation, it becomes a work of art, and functions as a point of reference to an imaginative realm greater than itself. But if its artist creator does not manage to create, or uncover, or discover, this greater imaginative realm, then the crafted material simply remains a piece of workmanship, with no more to it than meets the eye.

Then, as part and parcel of the problem of art and craft sharing a single platform, there is the issue of the visual value of crafted material. Most – almost all – crafted material is valued for its decorative quality alone, and this includes works of sublime achievement. Classical fine art paintings may be used for aesthetic mysticism, but most people just want them to 'look good' on the wall, with other subtler appreciations coming later, if at all. And despite the abandonment of the demands of classical realist technique, and the resulting technical free-for-all, most so-called artists are still trying to produce attractive looking combinations of colours and shapes, with the ideal of decorative value uppermost in their minds. This includes vast swathes of so-called abstract and conceptual art which is, when it comes down to it, just colours and shapes devoid of any semblance of narrative.

All of which brings us to the realm of found objects, junk, and garbage, presented in the name of art. This is what really gets people's goat, and often for good reason. By our definition, if you want to present garbage in the guise of art, it has to act as a symbolic reference – a theatrical prop - to a strange and disturbing world behind and beyond the 'crafted' material itself, and not merely be an end-in-itself representing possible shock value, or silliness, or absurdity. Joseph Beuys, for example, often littered his exhibition spaces with strange objects of all kinds – random junk to the uninitiated - but which were, to those familiar with the Beuys idiom, always instantly recognisable Beuys objects, and all adding substance to the mystery of the Beuys world.

### Partial summary of the story so far:

The crisis of modern art, now a century and a half old, arose the moment people tried to judge modern artworks by the standards of classical fine art. It can't be done, because the two are of entirely different modalities. Authentic modern art is achieving something quite other than classical fine art; it is not trying to impress you with its classical realist technique,

it is giving you a glimpse of a strange and disturbing imaginative realm that its artist has discovered, and is trying to substantiate. It does this in the same way that a film still does, or words in a book do; that is, by symbolic reference. Very often you have to inform yourself as to the features of the world referred to by a particular artwork, but once you have done so, then the artwork will speak for itself, and become luminously meaningful. Modern artworks are not aesthetic ends-in-themselves, they are portals to other worlds. Classical fine art wants you to luxuriate in what you see; modern art wants you to join the strange and disturbing imaginary world of which each artwork is only a symbolic referent.

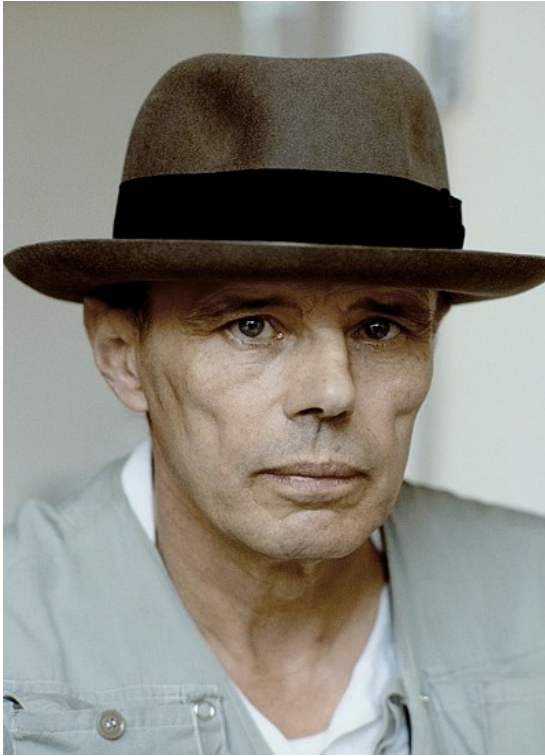
### Case study: Joseph Beuys

Unless and until you first grasp the 'Beuys world' – the artistically created context in which he operated, and what amounts to his real 'art' – almost everything he did and said would simply be puzzling, and peculiar, and vaguely absurd. To begin with, he looked half daft at the best of times, and his performances were bizarre in the extreme. For anyone with no feel for art, Beuys's doings would appear to be dull theatre by another name, characterised by certain repetitive themes, and infused by the presence – on or offstage – by the mysterious figure of Beuys himself, in his Homburg hat and fisherman's gilet. Beyond his set 'performances', Beuys also produced artworks of one kind or another, including collections of selected found objects, small scale constructions, larger scale 'environments', and drawings and watercolours.

Now what makes this 'art', as opposed to something else, is of course that it was deliberately presentational, in a theatrical sense. Had it not been, his actions would have to be viewed differently, and interpreted differently, in any number of ways, as possible manifestations of extreme eccentricity and mental illness. But once you present your material theatrically, as an offering to a willing audience, it has the potential, provided it can attain the qualities of being strange and disturbing, of transitioning from mere craft to art proper.

From our point of view, what makes Beuys especially interesting as an artist is the fact that, in many ways, he went to great lengths to try to try to get himself taken seriously – as some kind of artistic sage, or shaman, or eco-political philosopher – and in so doing potentially undermining his strange persona, as well as destroying his mystique. Yet his attempts at normality only served to reinforce his oddness, making him appear doubly enigmatic. And Beuys's explanations of his own 'actions' – his performances - are often surprisingly straightforward and logical, contrasting wildly with the unassailable strangeness of the actions themselves, and doing absolutely nothing to normalise him in the way he might have wanted. Does this mean that Beuys was seriously lacking in self-awareness, and really didn't have a clue how he appeared to others ? Quite possibly, but this has no bearing on his art one way or another.

And the more you delve - from all angles - into the Beuys world, the more interesting it gets, if, that is, artistically created worlds are of interest to you. Apparently Beuys's own account of his wartime adventures<sup>9</sup> – the crashed Stuka, the Tartars wrapping him in fat and felt – the details of which are integral to his artistic mythology - are factually impossible, and this might, if he were a public figure of another kind, be decisive in his exposure, and downfall. But he's not a priest or a politician, he's a modern artist, who's managed, by whatever means, to create a genuinely strange quasi-theatrical world; which, being a special kind of imaginative experience, is quite impervious to biographical truth or falsity. In other words, whether he was a liar, or a fool, or a charlatan, makes no difference to his art at all.



**Essential Beuys: felt hat and fat chair**

Along the same lines, Beuys was often involved with various ecological and educational projects, and he produced various wordy manifestoes and justifications to support his proposals. These were met with either interest, or bemusement or derision<sup>10</sup> by others, depending on the extent to which they sympathised with what they understood to be his ideals. Beuys was attempting to integrate art with politics, and whether or not he succeeded, his interventions really only amounted to further 'actions' - further Beuys performances – which further substantiated his enigmatic mystique.

And the point is, if you 'get' the Beuys world, you 'get' all the rest of it. You get the reality of his art. It is about connecting with the enigma, and then going with the flow. You enjoy the peculiarity of it all, as an imaginative opportunity you can flirt with, for yourself. You look at all his creations, and wonder what they are trying to tell you. And one of the most important – and enjoyable - things they are trying to tell you is that you will never know what they are trying to tell you. There is no point staring at them for hours on end, or even for longer than a few moments; their irresolvable mystery is so powerful that a few seconds will do. And when you next see a picture of Beuys, or one of his objects, all of this will come to mind, and you will be right in the middle of the experience he has created.

### **Case study: Gilbert and George**

Gilbert and George are best known for their brutalist, poster-like assemblages, often very large scale, and coloured in a manner that resembles stained glass windows. They tend to be captioned by a single commanding word, reflecting a kind of pared down crudity of thought. In a gallery setting, the posters are imposing, and authoritarian, like Stalinist directives of some kind.

They began their work as multimedia performers in the 1970s, painting their faces and miming to songs, and perfecting a kind of conversational folie à deux, taking alternate

turns to answer interview questions in single, precise, staccato sentences. They often wear very similar suits, and walk in step, even when off duty, as if sharing a single brain, and perhaps a single thought. They celebrate a non-flamboyant gayness, and hold random and contradictory opinions on a wide range of subjects, from art to politics. The overall effect of this apparently unending performance is disconcerting, and perplexing. And the enigma they present simply cannot be resolved, or explained away, or even 'made sense of', in any rational way, and this is powerfully characteristic of their art.

To attempt to 'decode' their work would be to miss the point entirely. Gilbert and George do not have a 'meaning', in the sense of a single explanatory narrative. If you want to understand them, you have to connect with the strangeness and otherness of the world they live in. That is as far as you can possibly go, without forcibly dismissing them, or explaining them away.



**'Gilbert and George' is a theatrical 'world', an inhabitable realm of the imagination, not an attempt at classical fine art**

And the 'art' of Gilbert and George is not limited to their posters, or to their peculiar conversational performances, or to their old-fashioned gayness and nonsensical opinions. It is all of those things together, and more, the 'more' being the totality of the strange and unsettling world they have created; and to which we, as the audience, are invited to participate, at least in part. We enter their world imaginatively through our encounter with them, irrespective of the medium, be it their posters in a gallery, or a film about them, or an article in a magazine, or even the sight of them walking together in London's Whitechapel. The 'art' is the 'Gilbert and George world' – not the individual artworks - and we experience this art by immersing ourselves in it through our intuitive imaginations, and having grasped something of its fascinating strangeness, we find this fascinating strangeness flowing back into their individual artworks, whenever we then encounter them. This would have the effect of bestowing on, say, a Gilbert and George poster, whether in a book, or as a postcard, or on the wall in a gallery, a kind of symbolic, referential meaningfulness which someone who has not attuned themselves to the Gilbert and George world would not be able to share.

Viewing 'art' in this way - with individual artworks only deriving their significance from their position within a greater imaginative idea - is not particularly difficult or demanding, it is simply a matter of being able to grasp this greater idea. You have to make the effort to see if the artist is offering you an encounter with an entire perspective, or if they are just presenting you with crafted objects in the hope of perhaps achieving such a perspective. Because of course not all modern art succeeds in its quest, and much of it is just poorly conceived, poorly orchestrated, derivative, and opportunistic.

### Case study: Andy Warhol

Andy Warhol is the best known example of an artist widely disparaged for the naïveté of his craft – despite the prices his works fetch in sales - yet who created an inhabitable world entirely of his own. This 'world' was a combination of paintings, films, music and fashion, and it very much included the living figure of Andy himself, as an ethereal and disconnected cipher who worshipped consumer society and all its gaudy, superficial and faintly fraudulent icons, from advertisements to paparazzi snaps. And it is this created world which is Warhol's real 'art', not his individually crafted pieces, which in themselves don't amount to much, and, let's face it, could easily be mistaken for poorly executed homework assignments at a commercial art college.



Signposts to the Warhol world

Warhol projected – and perhaps cultivated - an exceedingly strange and disturbing persona. He appeared to be autistic and perhaps sociopathic in his superficiality and in his

complete lack of ordinary affect. He inhabited a world of high camp theatricality, where the only things of interest were glamour and sensationalism, and desultory conversation. His art was not a satirical undermining of consumer society, it was a celebration of it, extolling life at its most luridly superficial, and pretentious. He wasn't offering a critique of high culture, and classical fine art; nor was he offering a subversion of it; he was glorying instead in an environment of his own creation, where superficiality, and not serious-minded profundity, reigned supreme.

What made the Warholian world 'artistic' as opposed to sociopathic, was its deliberate theatricality. It was always directed at an audience, and specifically designed to be enjoyed as a spectacle, from start to finish. Had it not been, it would not have fulfilled the requirement of 'art', which is that art itself is grounded in theatre, not in real life. To be an artist, you have to present your artworks within a theatrical context, where the audience consciously understands the nature of the theatrical pretence, and does not feel compelled, or pressured, to participate. Theatrical participation is a form of entertainment, and the relationship between artist and audience is essentially different from that of, say, voyeurism, or medical analysis, or ritual. Warhol's art is designed to entertain.

### Case study: Gregor Schneider

Yet how does our committed gallery-goer make the transition from, say, a single artwork, to an entire imaginary world? How could you work out what world you are being invited into? On the evidence of a single artwork, you probably can't. You need to take into consideration a number of works collectively, together with a series of other indications which may be supplied by the artist, or which may be supplied by contextual information of another kind. For example, on their own, one or two very ordinary looking photographs by Gregor Schneider, will not tell you very much - if anything at all - but once you are informed of his obsession with disturbing angles on normal living spaces - as arenas of past or future sexual, physical and psychological abuse - you become alert to his perspective, and you see the ordinary photographs anew. Then other works by Schneider - perhaps also very innocent-looking and unremarkable on the surface - become aspects of your deepening grasp of the 'Schneider world' - the Schneider obsessions - and his art begins to explain itself, and becomes an immersive realm of its own.

Now the crucial difference between art and real life is of course that art is a form of entertainment, and you contemplate it as a form of fascinating pleasure, not as an unalterable truth. Schneider's artworks are to be interpreted as you would stills for a disturbing feature film, and they are quite different from, say, forensic photographs of a crime scene, although they may well attempt to conjure up a very similar sense of morbid fascination and curiosity.

Schneider's photographs are also quite unrelated to the fine art photography of craftspeople such as Ansel Adams or Karsh of Ottawa, and it is absurd to try and judge them by those standards. This does not mean that they are any less powerful in terms of informational content, or any less thoughtfully composed and constructed, simply that they employ an entirely different idiom to get their message across. They have been carefully designed to convey a certain clinical lifelessness.





**Gregor Schneider: not trying to be Eggleston, or Stephen Shore. And he achieves something altogether more interesting**

So Schneider's real art is the Schneider world, composed of a number of artworks in different media, including installations and performances. Schneider has orchestrated his artworks to realise a sum greater than its parts. Any particular Schneider artwork, taken on its own, and judged by classical fine art aesthetics, might well be derisory, but his creation as a whole – his art – is immensely powerful, and fascinating, and well worth whatever it takes to engage with it.

### Judging good from bad

One might be tempted with a simple rule of thumb, of the sort that would say, the more extensive the world you are invited into, the better the art. But the problem with 'art' is that it is not about good and bad; it is only about achieving, or not achieving. If an artist achieves a strange and disturbing world for us to partake in, then they've created art; if they've failed to do so, then they haven't.

There are many people who, for various reasons, want to be considered 'artists'. Being an 'artist' means – in the popular imagination – that you have transcended mere craftsmanship, and are now operating in a special zone beholden to creative inspiration, and a very real dedication to that inspiration, and you want other people to recognise that. Craftspeople are considered to be mere technicians, carrying out mundane tasks with varying degrees of skill. Artists, on the other hand, as we like to think of them, are people who have been 'touched' in some special way, and blessed by the creative muse.

Now why does Tracey Emin want to be thought of as an artist? Possibly because her activities might otherwise lose their cachet, and be held in less esteem than they currently are. And by our definition there is nothing strange or disturbing about the objects she creates, and the 'world' they allude to is the ordinary world we already inhabit, albeit sensationalised, and sexualised, and overloaded with self-obsession. She is using 'art' as a kind of conceptual garnish, to confer a sense of gravity on works which might otherwise not have any at all.

Is this fair? Well if the word 'art' is just a loose term for any kind of creative activity tinged with bohemianism, then anyone is entitled to give themselves a bit of a boost by aligning themselves – in their own minds - with grander company, in the way that a first year

university student might like to describe themselves as a 'brain surgeon' or a 'psychiatrist'. But we're trying for a definition here which can help discriminate between ordinary theatrical performers and genuine artists, and for that to work, certain key qualities have to be present in an artist's oeuvre for it to qualify as art.

What Emin is basically doing is representing aspects of her past life in a theatrical format, augmented by a variety of symbolic props – her artworks – which act as memorabilia. She also gives readings, and lectures, and interviews, all of which contribute to a very cultivated persona, namely that of a conflicted soul battling to integrate artistic sensitivity with character defects such as egomania and rampant hedonism. She maintains the public interest by a controlled mixture of titillation - in which she insinuates the possibility of further sexual explicitness in her works, yet never quite delivers - and occasional public debauchery.



**Tracey Emin: a very successful confessional 'art therapy' roadshow, using bits and pieces of sexualised crafted material as theatrical props, but this is not authentic 'art'**

Of course failing to qualify as 'art' by our definition does not diminish the theatrical effectiveness – or enjoyableness - of her ongoing performance in any way, it simply offers a contextualisation of it from a specific perspective. Though this may help to explain why even those prepared to consider her an artist have a niggling feeling that they are being taken for a ride<sup>11</sup>, and that her graphic and sculptural work – the crude sketches, the jerry-built installations – just look like slapdash mock ups and cartoons for something more substantial, supposedly coming later, but which never does. And even if we were to accept that modern art is all about decoding hidden symbols – something we have strongly argued against here – Emin's presentational bits of junk don't really call for much head scratching.

Damien Hirst is a marginally more interesting case. Whereas Emin seldom produces striking imagery – the unmade bed<sup>12</sup> being a rare exception – Hirst is obviously keen to arrest the eye; the shark and the cow being famous sculptural 'installations'. Hirst produces work in a variety of styles; some splatter paintings, dots, kaleidoscopic glassworks, butterflies, rotting heads; yet if we try to intuit, from what we can see, and from what we can find out about Hirst and his intentions, what sort of an imaginative landscape he might be directing us to, we end up lost in space. There is no strange and disturbing narrative underpinning his works; there seems to be only a shrewd craftsman plying his trade to an eager audience. Hirst is neither a Beuys nor a Duchamp.



**Damien Hirst: not yet an artist, and probably not that bothered about becoming one**

It might seem from all that we are arguing that there are certain creative rules to follow, if one is to become an artist. But it doesn't work like that. It doesn't matter how original one's art is, or how distinctive the style, or how easy to read. It doesn't matter how an artist behaves, or what he or she has to say about their work, or where they get their inspiration from. All that matters is that they are able to transport us, somehow, through their art, to strange and disturbing worlds of the imagination that, when all else is said and done, we could not have had access to in any other way. You can't get to Henry's world other than by watching *Eraserhead* (1977)<sup>13</sup>; you can't get to the nightmarish realm of dimensional distortion other than by seeing Francis Bacon's paintings; you can't get to the Warhol world other than through Andy's icons. But once you're in, you're in.

Art is of course supremely paradoxical, and can, at a moment's notice, change direction. What can seem innocent in one context can become sinister in another. Apparently innocent Sunday paintings of flowers and kittens, unremarkable for decades, can, with the addition of certain information, become transformed into symbols of fear and dread. So we can never be sure that what appears to be ephemeral rubbish now, won't at some future stage turn into genuine art. In other words, our judgements of Hirst and Emin need to be understood as provisional, though that doesn't mean that, in the meantime, we're prevented from pointing out the 'bleedin' obvious'.

Lastly; one of the biggest problems with this new explanation of modern art is that the burden of appreciative knowledge shifts from the artist to the viewer, in the sense that if you're not informed about an artist and their projects, you can't hope to get much out of their art. It's no longer simply enough to stand in front of an artwork and let your likes and dislikes rise to the surface. You have to meet the artist half way. And although this may be asking too much of your average gallery-goer, it's where modern art begins.

## Summary: drawing the threads together

To get the best out of modern art, you have to abandon the ideas of classical fine art, and appreciate that modern artworks are not ends-in-themselves, they are signposts to imaginative possibilities, in the same way that a film still is only a hint of a much larger experience. Sometimes the artist gives you everything you need to know, as with the paintings of Francis Bacon; sometimes they give you very little, as with the works of Joseph Beuys, in which case you will have to find out more for yourself. Unfortunately, a lot of modern art doesn't lead to strange and disturbing worlds for us to savour; it's just stuff put out and about in hope.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Sewell (2012).

<sup>2</sup> See also Zaaiman (2012),(2015).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Spalding (2003).

<sup>4</sup> See the examples given by Stecker in Levinson (2003).

<sup>5</sup> See also Kant (2007) for similar theory.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this study, 'modernism' is defined as equivalent to all forms of 'modern contemporary art', from late 19<sup>th</sup> century until today.

<sup>7</sup> See Arnason (2010) for an exhaustive history of modernism.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Lubbock's decoding of famous modern paintings (2011), or Russell (1981).

<sup>9</sup> See Mesch (2007).

<sup>10</sup> See Buchloh in Ray (2001).

<sup>11</sup> See Coco (2015) and elsewhere.

<sup>12</sup> *My Bed* (1998).

<sup>13</sup> A David Lynch film.

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