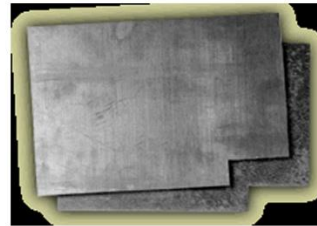


'But is it art?'

THE SEARCH FOR A SIMPLE, PRACTICAL AND ILLUMINATING ANSWER

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Abstract

'Art' still needs a practical, useful definition, not of the academic variety, but rather of the plain and simple sort that you can usefully take with you into a gallery, and apply directly to what you see. People want to know, with a basic clarity, what it is they are looking at, and how to judge the good from the bad. Because if you don't know what 'art' is, and you think it's all about 'classical fine crafting', then you are missing out on a very special type of experience, and an entire realm of imaginative possibilities. As it turns out, the best way to think of 'art' – taking a huge hint from the concept of 'arthouse cinema' - is not about delighting in solemn, stolid museum pieces, and developing a deferential love of the classical: it is all about an exploration - through various available media - of the strange, the disturbing, and the darkly fascinating. The great thing about art is that it offers a safe and enjoyable environment in which to contemplate all kinds of darkness, without having to submit to this negativity in life itself.

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Introduction

'Art' desperately needs a handy, practical definition, not of the scholarly conceptual variety, but rather of the plain and simple sort that you can usefully take with you into a gallery, and apply directly to what you see. You want to be able to work out for yourself whether or not a Raphael masterpiece and a Duchamp readymade belong in the same exhibition, and whether or not Emin's bed and Hirst's shark tank are good art. But as things currently stand, 'art' is a vague

and confusing concept, seemingly covering everything from classical paintings to bizarre street performances, and as a consequence totally devoid of a single overarching and convincing meaning.

Why does this matter ? Simply because if you don't have a clear idea of what 'art' is, you don't really know what you are looking at when you visit an art gallery. This may seem an astonishing thing to say, given that there is no agreed definition of 'art' even among the professionals, but what other conclusion is there ? And if you aren't sure what you're looking at, or even what you should be looking for, all you can possibly do is resort to a judgement based on your likes and dislikes, flavoured with vague ideas of what you think you 'ought to think', picked up from reviewers and the relevant 'experts'. Of course there is nothing heinous about doing this – after all, it's what everyone does when it comes to subjects they are not adequately informed about – but it rests on mistaken assumptions that are actually preventing you from seeing what an artwork might be trying to say.

Why this situation exists, and how it can be resolved, is of crucial concern to anyone interested in enjoying art, whether as a practising artist or as a critical observer. This is not mere scholarly chatter or conceptual wordplay: it is about understanding the basic principles of art itself, and how one can best appreciate a genuine artwork.

'Art' as a problem

There are several interconnected strands to the problem of trying to grasp what art might be all about. For one thing, art does not seem to have an easily identifiable essence – a common core - that meaningfully explains itself through its hugely diverse manifestations. Even though we like to put them in one basket, painting and dance and music seem to be unrelated to one another, with no substantial connection between them, except very vaguely, as things we can 'witness for enjoyment'. Because how do you relate a Brahms sonata to a street performance, or the Mona Lisa to a shark tank ? Why do we even call all these things 'art' in the first place ?

Next, there is the very real conundrum of how to relate the classical to the modern. No one has any particular problem in validating the classical, except insofar as someone might find museum pieces lifeless and remote, as well as faintly boring¹. Everyone recognises the high-quality craftsmanship of the sort on display in national galleries, even if they are not particularly moved by it. Classicism – meaning crafted with exceptional skill - is the benchmark – the gold standard – by which we judge cultural artefacts, and we think of it as completely self-justifying. The problem arises with modern artworks, many of which do not seem to represent either much skill, or much significance.

So we have the problem of the diversity of unconnected art forms, coupled with the apparent incongruity of modern art in relation to its classical correlate. All of this leads to a situation where people are not only confused as to the nature of art in general, but also unable to appreciate what modern art might be trying to say.

On the other hand, there is very strong sense, throughout the wider artistic community, that you don't need to know exactly what art is to get involved with it. You just do whatever it is you do, and let the rest – the futile chatter about 'what is art ?' - take care of itself. It's as if everyone already knows what art is, even if they have difficulty articulating it in a convincing way. A musician doesn't have to be able to define music to be a maestro, and this is what artists and critics believe is also true of art. But the problem is that if you don't have a clear idea of what art is trying to do, you can't possibly enjoy modern contemporary works with any depth, and you are missing out on what art really has to offer.

Historical background

We can easily trace the origin of our difficulties with art back to the emergence of modernism – that is to say, modern experimental painting styles – in the latter part of the 19th century. It began with Impressionism, and developed from there. Until that point, we can be reasonably sure that ‘art’ equated with ‘the classical fine arts’ – dance, music, painting, and so on - and that there was no real sense that these arts were in any way problematic, or ill-defined, or confusing. Of course theorists had historically long been aware of the various philosophical difficulties associated with the arts, such as the problem of articulating aesthetic experiences in words, but this is not the same as deciding that ‘art’ itself is problematic, and that we don’t really know what it is.

What basically happened was that modernism established the possibility that artworks need not necessarily conform to strict classical standards to be taken seriously, and that stylistic experimentation was to be encouraged. But with experimentation came uncertainty, and the idea that no one knew quite where to draw the line, and that the concept of a recognisable ‘work of art’ might itself disappear in the process.

Dispensing with classical standards also means that it is no longer possible to identify serious artworks by their manifest classical form, content and technique. The presence of these standard characteristics had always been a reassuring starting point in any encounter with new material, and their absence brought immediate difficulties: perhaps it was painted by an ape, or composed by someone tone deaf, or sculpted by accident, who could tell? Yet what is important here is not the loss of the formal features as such – they could conceivably be replaced - rather it is the destruction of the venerable idea that ‘art’ is equivalent to ‘classical fine art’. ‘Art’ then runs the risk of becoming something other than that which everyone thought it was.

The gradual introduction of a modernist sensibility also brought about changes in a general understanding, as people saw it, of the very ‘purpose of art’. This crucial shift in perspective is not easy to pinpoint with any great historical accuracy, even though we can be sure it happened. Because the abandoning of classical form inevitably involved the abandonment of classical narrative, and this meant in turn that painting became an aesthetic experience in itself - as opposed to an educative or religious one - which meant that people began to look at paintings for their aesthetic – that is to say, sensory - content, rather than for their cultural or spiritual worthiness. This in turn would have brought about a change in the reasons people went to galleries in the first place, resulting in exhibitions of new paintings becoming sensational social entertainments, rather than the respectful contemplation of cultural artefacts that had previously been the norm.

It is worth taking a moment to ponder here whether or not our entire modern aesthetic sensibility – that is to say, our modern ability to view crafted works in terms only of the aesthetic pleasure we can squeeze out of them, and this would include the most conservative and reactionary high camp classicism – does not in fact represent a decisive break with the past. We know, for example, that illuminated manuscripts or African fetishes are not ‘art’ in the way we think of it, even though these objects are regularly exhibited in galleries as if they were; and we can’t avoid viewing them as objects of purely aesthetic interest, not as they were intended. This is because we now treat the world of the arts as an opportunity – first and foremost - for sensory and hedonistic pleasure, and not as some kind of spiritual, educative engagement; and there is no real call for us to recalibrate our thinking, so as to try to imagine how previous generations would have seen things. Even our commonplace idea of a standalone ‘work of art’ may have been meaningless to people of an earlier age, because art would always have been created to perform a specific worldly function directed to a specific worldly end. The idea of ‘art for sensual fun’ or

'art for the sake of it' is clearly something very modern, and the outcome of forces which are themselves of recent origin.

What we are keen to identify in all of this is the transition from a classical conception of art as the fine arts, to a modern conception of art as the 'realm of the senses'. In the classical perspective, the fine arts were part of the fabric of society, decorative and enjoyable perhaps, but primarily designed to fulfil a useful function, whether as a status symbol, or means of religious instruction, or some other specific purpose. In the modern perspective, the idea which emerges from the transformative democratisation of the 'fine arts' into 'art' is that of art as something created to be enjoyed for its own sake, not as part of some grander scheme.

Appreciating crafted material: aesthetics and the aesthetic gaze

We now need to introduce, on the back of our identification of 'art for art's sake', an important set of ideas about 'ways of seeing.' This will go some way to explaining how the confusion between 'art' and 'crafted material' arises, and how crucial it is that the two are understood as ultimately quite different from one another, even if they share a common origin.

The road to art begins with crafted material of one kind or another, depending on the chosen medium. Most crafted material is functional and utilitarian, and constructed as technology to enhance and improve our everyday lives. We can categorise these goods as tools and machinery, and for the most part we see them only in terms of their functionality, largely disregarding their appearance. And insofar as care is taken to make tools and machinery appear attractive, this is known as 'design'.

Then there is the realm of decorative crafting, deliberately undertaken to make our lived environment look nicer. We assess decoration by means of a particular type of looking, a specific type of gaze, and it is this distinctive form of 'looking at something for its visual qualities alone' which is the origin and essence of the visual aesthetic sensibility. Other aesthetic sensibilities relate to other senses and other capacities, but it is the visual one with which we tend to be the most familiar.

As one would suspect, none of our sensibilities exist in an utterly pure form, as there are always other considerations influencing a perception. So an object can always be appraised from many different perspectives more or less at one and the same time: a painting can be enjoyed for its visual features, while simultaneously one thinks about what inspired it, and what it means, and what techniques the artist employed to realise it, and so on. And of course the aesthetic gaze can be educated and refined by putting it to good use, and feeding it with information. The more you exercise your visual capacities, the sharper and deeper your perceptions, and the greater your powers of observation.

The aesthetic gaze - enjoying something primarily for its visual qualities alone, irrespective of other considerations - can of course be applied to anything that we can see: a landscape; faces; animals. And each visual category - each class of objects that we can look at - has something like its own rationale, and its own logical coherence operating on a continuum from, say, a casual glance, to a fascinated, fixated stare, with differing levels of valuation emerging according to circumstance, for example the experience of a 'particularly beautiful' sunset, as opposed to an 'unexceptional' one.

All this is simply an attempt to get a feel for a very basic 'way of seeing', in which an object - in this case an item of crafted material - is appraised on the basis of its sensorial features alone, amounting to something like a recreational experience, whether momentary, or enduring. It is this particular 'way of seeing' we tend to adopt when we visit art galleries and museums, insofar

as we are hoping for a series of aesthetic experiences as a result of viewing the various artefacts on display.

Now when we combine the aesthetic gaze with crafted material deliberately crafted to appeal to this gaze, we arrive at what most people like to think of as 'art'. There seems to be an irrefutable logic to this, in that the aesthetic gaze has as its foundation various notions of 'beauty', and crafted material which strives for beauty will naturally appeal to our aesthetic gaze. This is not as circular an argument as it may seem, because it explains the triangulated relationship between beauty and certain kinds of crafted material, and the aesthetic, sensorial, appreciation of such material. It explains what many painters and dancers and musicians are trying to achieve, and how they want their crafting to be valued.

However, sensorial aesthetics is not yet the legitimate domain of 'art', even if many think it is, and many would probably want it to be. This is because there is really no need to introduce the additional concept of 'art' to identify and explain the rationale of material crafted for sensorial delight alone: it can be fully accounted for, from its inception to its profoundest experience, by 'aesthetics' and the logic of the aesthetic gaze. So how do we then get from aesthetics, to 'art' ?.

Presentational material, & the theatrical pretence²

So far we have identified two key types of crafted material – functional and decorative – as part of a quest for a wider understanding of the ontological origins of that which is distinctively 'art'. All art can be traced back conceptually to crafted material of one kind or another, because – as a first principle – art cannot be accidental or naturally occurring – it requires human crafting of one kind or another, no matter how slight, for it to be what it is.

And on the basis of the fact that everything that is going to become art must, as a matter of principle, be humanly crafted, we have identified at least one major category of crafted material, namely that which is directed at our aesthetic – our sensorial – capacities. In other words, we are talking about crafted material which we contemplate, and appreciate, and enjoy, for its sensorial beauty alone, disregarding any utilitarian function it may have. And to enjoy an object in this way, we switch to a specific way of looking and seeing, namely a 'standing back and admiring it for its beauty' mode, with the understanding that 'beauty' is being used here in a very loose and inclusive sense, such that it can include paradoxical states such as 'beautiful ugliness', and so on. The 'switch' from one type of seeing -in terms of an object's function - to another – its attractiveness - is pivotal.

And there is yet another non-utilitarian mode of engaging with a crafted object which is key to an understanding of art, and it is one with which we are all very familiar, even if we are not always fully aware of the precise nature. This is the 'theatrical spectator' mode, in which we enter into a tacit agreement with a performer, thereby allowing ourselves to be entertained theatrically; and this involves a quite different type of engagement from the strictly aesthetic or sensorial. In a theatrical 'pretence' we engage with some kind of staged narrative and unfolding story, following the action by means of verbal cues, or mimed ones, or by some other means, often not paying much attention to the aesthetics involved. We go along with the unfolding action in an agreed pretence – an implicit understanding that we are in make-believe – engaging with it as a form of entertainment.

And our understanding of the theatrical mode of entertainment is very basic to being human, and is effortlessly grasped even by very young children. The theatrical pretence can be established in a single gesture, as in someone striking a pose in a casual setting, or in pointing to an object, or it can be established more formally, as in taking a seat in an auditorium.

Now it turns out that it is this very basic and primordial theatrical relationship which is the origin of that which is distinctively 'art'. Art – regardless of the medium, whether painting or dance or music or whatever - is basically a form of theatre, as opposed to a form of sensorial aesthetics, which is the realm of craft. Both involve humanly crafted presentational material, and both involve characteristic modes of looking and seeing, but the paths they take, and the logic of their unfolding, is quite different one from the other. Aesthetic material is essentially about sensorial beauty, and how it can best be portrayed and appreciated; artistic material is essentially about a very specific type of narrative, and how it can best be put across.

The arthouse narrative: the strange and disturbing

Locating 'art' in the realm of the theatrical – as opposed to the aesthetic - is still only a part of the story, and requires further clarification and specification if it is to identify the distinctive characteristics of art with any real explanatory force. Narrative storytelling - in a theatrical mode – can address any conceivable subject, and can be conducted in any conceivable setting - a school classroom, for example, or in the street, or in a national theatre, and even in a casual conversation - and this means that the sheer unrestricted range of options effectively empties the category of explanatory and informative value. For 'art' to distinguish itself meaningfully from 'non-art', we need to have a convincing set of characteristics which will explain why one thing 'is what it is', while clearly separating it from 'that which it is not'. We also need to know, along the way, why it is that 'art' continues to confuse.

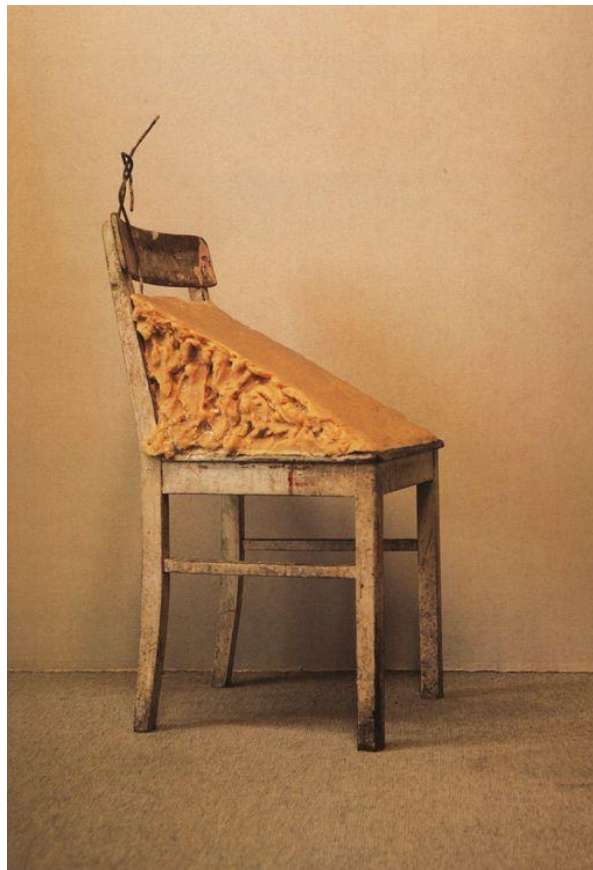
So what kind of theatrical narrative would qualify as distinctively 'artistic' ? We know that most theatrical narrative events, ordinarily speaking, simply reflect variations of the world we already inhabit, and are meant to be seen as coextensive with normality. This is as true of Shakespeare as it is of science fiction, and of a police procedural, so even if the worlds you are being invited to enter into are not those which you are very likely to experience directly, you are not meant to believe you are dealing with an alternative reality. Most theatrical narratives, from films to television to the stage, locate themselves in, and are meant to reflect, with infinite variation, normal life, as normally experienced.

But if we look around for some features which we might identify as characteristically 'artistic', the kindred concept of 'arthouse' turns out to be very helpful. 'Arthouse' cinema is usually taken to mean films with an 'odd', and 'difficult', and 'stylishly distinctive', and 'intellectual' flavour, concentrating on subjects of a bizarre nature, and deliberately positioning itself outside the mainstream. And if we drill down further, we see that what is distinctively 'arthouse' is not its stylish quirks or its intellectual, deviant content, but rather its strangeness, and unsettling otherness. Meaning, ultimately, that characteristically 'arthouse' equates authentically with characteristically 'strange and disturbing', and that it does so in such a way as to distinguish it decisively from other genres with which it might share a passing resemblance.

All of which means that, as we see it, 'arthouse' and 'art' are effectively one and the same. For 'art' to be characteristically itself, and not to be confused with something else, it has to be about the theatrical presentation of the strange and the disturbing. It uses theatrical means to orchestrate its narratives, and it does so as an invitation to an entire world of experience. In this way, 'art', as a theatrical entertainment, reveals itself to be fundamentally quite other than aesthetic craft, which has as its objective an optimal, beautiful, sensation. Art – exactly like an unsettling film, or staged play – wants you to immerse yourself in its world, and take on its perspective, while aesthetic 'craft'³ only wants you to marvel at its colours, and swoon at its sounds, and be dazzled by the sensations it offers. Art is a disturbing form of immersive entertainment; aesthetic craft is really just an advanced form of decoration.

Art as something like 'film concret'⁴

The question then arises, how does the 'theatrical pretence' – and its invitation to a theatrical narrative – relate to inanimate crafted objects such as paintings, or sculptures? The answer is that, in the hands of an artist, paintings, and sculptures, and found objects, and readymades, become, as it were, theatrical props and lobby cards, referring to a larger, more encompassing narrative which may or may not be immediately apparent, depending on the way the artist has chosen to orchestrate it, and the extent to which the onlooker has informed themselves. For example, the many bits of random and loosely connected junk that Joseph Beuys presented as artworks make almost no sense on their own, despite Beuys's own often lucid accounts of what they are supposed to mean, but taken collectively they amount to a fascinating unfolding narrative centred on Beuys himself, combining autobiography, fictional biography, Beuys's mentality, strange extremist performance, and all kinds of other attributes. As a possible sculpture, a triangular wedge of animal fat covering the seat of a readymade wooden chair doesn't make much classical aesthetic sense - especially as the fat eventually decomposed to nothing - but as a calling card for the Beuys world, it is as powerful as any theatrical gesture could possibly be. Fat Chair (1964-1985) invites you to join the Beuys narrative, then it is up to you to take it further.



**Beuys's Fat Chair: it's a theatrical prop from Beuys's mysterious, unfathomable world,
not a metaphor for anything**

True enough, 'art' narratives are not all that easy to discern – some are deeply buried - and this is why many people fail to pick up on them, preferring instead to go for 'symbols'. So if Beuys's artworks are viewed as if they are standalone objects, they will require 'interpretation', and this invariably involves looking for metaphors, and other forms of allegory. Art then becomes a matter of 'symbolology' and systematic decoding. Of course this can be enjoyable in a crosswordy type of way, but it's a trivial activity when compared with the immersive experience that goes with viewing art as the taking on of an entire perspective. Beuys's Fat Chair is not a mere metaphor for human corporeality - or some such feeble reading – it's a movie still, a lobby card, a theatrical prop – inviting you to Beuys's strange and disturbing 'film concret'.

But how exactly do you discern an art narrative such as the one orchestrated by Joseph Beuys? How do you 'get' what he is saying? You have to start by familiarising yourself with an artist's oeuvre as a whole, sifting through the clues, and combining it with whatever contextual information seems to be relevant, and then letting the central narrative reveal itself of its own accord. This is not as difficult or demanding as it may seem, if you are prepared to put in the legwork. It is simply a matter of looking beyond the individual artworks for something which might meaningfully constitute a broader narrative - an encompassing vision, if you like - which would then make sense of what might otherwise look to be rather underpowered items on their own. Reproductions of Brillo boxes and Coke bottles and soup cans don't have much to say by way of classical aesthetics, but they come into their own as calling cards to the Warhol world.



It's the Warhol world which is Warhol's real 'art', not the individual artworks – the Coke bottles, soup cans, screen prints, and the rest - which only derive their meaning from the narrative world they refer to, and are an essential part of

And as with anything based on ethereal intuitions and meetings of minds, we can never be certain about the narrative we discover, especially if they are characteristically mystifying. All one can do is assess the evidence, and go from there. Interpreting Beuys's artworks one at a time as modern day allegories is a tedious and disheartening affair, as it tends to be powered by a sense that his whole project was really just a student jape, and that if he'd only be able to paint like an old master we wouldn't have to put up with all this nonsense in the first place. But if you join him in his theatrical production, and come to see how all his works are part of a mysterious narrative environment, and that the central narrative is as essentially strange and indecipherable and provocative as only the most fascinating narratives can be, then you get what his 'art' is all about. His 'art' is not a collection of desultory readymades and found objects, combined with bizarre performances, meaningless drawings, and absurd manifestoes: it is the Beuys world itself, presented to us through various media, with all the individual artworks merely items of artistic stagecraft.

However, just because we have redefined modern contemporary artworks as narrative props doesn't mean that one can't enjoy them aesthetically as objects in their own right: of course one can, although the aesthetic impacts one will encounter are unlikely to bear much relation to those of classical fine art. One can develop an aesthetic taste for anything, given that any object can always be abstracted from a given context and contemplated for its aesthetic features alone, but the point is that when it comes to items of modern contemporary art, the aesthetics of the artwork are very much secondary to its place in a greater theatrical narrative, and that insofar as the artwork can be seen to derive its meaning from a greater narrative, its aesthetics are almost unimportant. These works are not meant to be objects of classical fine art, they are meant to be part of a modern narrative environment.

If Beuys's peculiar sculptures, and installations, and performances, and drawings, and general detritus come together as 'art', then doesn't this make modern contemporary art a complete free-for-all, allowing anyone to exhibit anything for any reason? How do we tell the difference between one thing and another? How do we judge the good from the bad?

It is not the presence of a narrative alone which certifies art. After all, anything and everything can, with a modicum of effort, be made to generate some sort of narrative, however flimsy. What makes 'art' distinctly itself is the presence of a 'strange and disturbing' narrative; a 'storyline' which, subtly or harshly, openly or insidiously, will unsettle us, and rattle our cage. Normality – even in its guise of the extraordinary and the unusual and the astonishing – is addressed by ordinary crafted narrative, and this category of narrative works ultimately to reassure, with the obligatory 'happy ending'. Art is of an altogether different order.

Not art: Tracey Emin

We can see this if we look at the work of 'artists' who, for whatever reason, fail to access the strange and disturbing. They may not even be particularly interested in doing so. Tracey Emin, for example, is very much engaged in employing crafted objects – installations, sculptures – in the service of her theatrical narrative, but this narrative, though sensational and lascivious, has nothing unsettling about it from any angle. It is straightforwardly confessional in the manner of a clinical 'case study', with every prop – whether a neon sculpture or a piece of writing or a patchwork quilt – deriving its meaning entirely from its relation to Emin's narrative persona, which itself is a variation on the reassuringly normal. There is nothing strange about extremes of expression. This is not to denigrate her craft – her single-minded self-promotion – which is as

unquestionably effective as it is successful; it is simply to say that none of what she does qualifies, by our definition, as 'art'.



**Emin's My Bed (1998): nothing strange or disturbing here:
it is no more than exactly what it looks like**

Not yet art: Damien Hirst

Hirst is a more complex and interesting figure when it comes to deciding whether or not his work is 'art'. Some of his pieces could be described as unsettling, but all the contextual evidence tends to dispel that impression, and make us think that he is simply a canny, calculating sensationalist. Once again, this is not a value judgement, merely a definitional one, concerned only to identify a very specific kind of narrative. Hirst has been successful in publicising his wares, but the many and various images, unlike those produced by Jeff Koons, are not held together by some kind of disquieting thread, and so as a totality they lack a compelling core. Some of Koons's imagery is of a piece with Hirst's, but what underpins it and validates it as authentic 'art' is its militant soullessness and relentless emptiness, echoing the defiant superficiality of Andy Warhol. Everything about the Koons world – his persona and his artworks - is wholly congruent with itself, and it's impossible to detect the merest crack, the slightest moment of existential uncertainty, in his presentational edifice. Koons incarnates, through everything he does, says, or makes, a world of deeply disturbing refulgent vacuity. Not so Hirst; there is something unconvincing about him, something a little too calculating and opportunistic – in the wrong way - and this destroys the narrative cogency of his work.



**Hirst: The Pursuit of Oblivion (2004), & many others like it:
a little too calculated and cannily contrived to be convincing**



**Jeff Koons: absolutely resolute in a deeply disturbing allegiance
to soullessness and kitsch, and thereby a genuine and fascinating artist**

Interim summary: ‘art’ is about the strange and disturbing⁵

Aesthetic craft is designed to achieve a positive sensorial effect – an impact - generally categorised under the concept of ‘beauty’. Appreciating aesthetic craft involves concentrating solely on the interplay between the sensorial attributes of an object, irrespective of any purpose or utilitarian function it may have. Classical fine art – properly classical fine craft – of the sort to be found in museums and national galleries is the representative template for this kind of work.

Art, on the other hand, is all about exploring the strange and disturbing; and artists create, through their works, an unfolding narrative. This is orchestrated theatrically, very much like a film, so that individual artworks are not standalone objects but rather items which contribute to a larger landscape - a dispersed stage set, if you like - from which they then derive their meaning.

But it needs to be underlined – in case anyone was wondering - that only a fraction of the strivings taking place under the banner of modern contemporary art even remotely qualify as strange and disturbing, which means that much of what masquerades as art is not art at all, but merely crafted material of one sort or another. Happily enough for the cogency of our case, many of the most famous names in modern art – Warhol, Beuys, Duchamp, Gilbert & George, Jeff Koons, Francis Bacon, Lichtenstein, Kiefer, Rego, Cindy Sherman – benefit greatly from being understood as connoisseurs of the dark and disturbing, even in those instances where – like Warhol or Koons – they might declare themselves to be heading in quite the opposite direction.

The ‘But is it art ?’ query

Having offered a very general but practical definition of ‘art’, we can now return to the original question, in order to show both how it can be answered, and how it testifies to an ongoing confusion as to art’s true nature. When people ask the question ‘But is it art ?’, they are invariably perplexed by a modern contemporary artwork – probably a readymade, or a bizarre performance, or an inexplicable video – and wanting to know if it is worthy of being considered ‘art’ alongside works of a more classical nature. They are hoping for some convincing conceptual guidelines that will make sense of what appears to them to be so far removed from a normal understanding of art as to be impossible to judge.

We have seen that ‘art’ used to be about ‘classical fine art’, of the sort you found in art museums. Then something new emerged in the late 19th century, which opened up a division between classical standards and modern possibilities, resulting ultimately in a separation between sensorial aesthetics – properly the realm of craft - and theatrically-based art, with its rationale as an exploration of the strange and disturbing.

Yet having a common ancestry means that classical fine craft and modern art are bound to be in a state of perpetual confusion. Many people – including art professionals - approach modern contemporary artworks in exactly the same way they would standalone classical objects, judging them in terms of their aesthetic, sensorial value, and invariably concluding that the works are seriously deficient in all respects. They might then be prepared to look for a suitable scholarly interpretation of the work – an intellectual justification - but in the light of the self-evident magnificence of classical museum pieces, this grubbing for sloppy seconds can feel slightly condescending, perhaps even demeaning, in that it involves excusing what appears to be adolescent silliness and ineptitude for no good reason, and, worse still, pretending that ‘bad is good’ in wilful defiance of the evidence.

As a consequence, much modern art criticism and interpretation is haunted - tormented - by the possibility that the pundits don't really know what they are talking about, and that they may unwittingly be making colossal fools of themselves. This puts the critics and commentators in a difficult position. Negotiating a safe passage becomes very tricky, requiring surefooted equivocation, and a heavy reliance on circumstantial detail – anecdotal ballast - as the mainstay of any commentary. How else do you write about something when you have no real idea what the topic is ?

This means that the default position underpinning almost every conception of art, from the moderately informed amateur to the educated professional, is that classical fine art is the real art – top to tail, beginning to end - and that all the rest is merely adolescent experimentation: fun and entertaining on occasion, perhaps, but ultimately really just an aberration that won't seem to go away.

This is further reinforced by another popular conception so pervasive in everyday thought and speech as likely to be inviolable. It is the idea that any form of sublime crafting – beautiful workmanship, irrespective of the medium it appears in – ought properly to be described as 'art', so as to elevate it above and beyond the slightly grubby world of mere technique, and mere practiced proficiency. We all seem to believe that it's wrong somehow not to have a numinous realm hovering 'above and beyond' mere crafting, and somehow the idea of 'art' seems to answer the call for just such a place. So all manifestations of high culture and civilised refinement are, from this perspective, best labelled as 'art'. In crafting terms, 'art' is as high as you can go.

So the essence of the problem with the question 'But is it art ?' rests on two factors, both pulling in the same direction, and both, in a confusing way, serving to obscure what 'art' actually is. We have the implicit idea that 'art' is really classical fine art, combined with the need to distinguish sublime crafting from ordinary workmanship, leading us to want to classify everything in terms of some kind of traditional, classical scheme, yet the whole thing falls to pieces when we are confronted by examples of modern contemporary art, in that works like readymades and found objects and installations bear no relation to classicism.

But if we understand that the category of 'art' is itself quite different from 'classical crafting', and that it is based in an immersive theatricality, where artworks are not meant to be standalone examples of fine workmanship, but rather parts of an imaginative landscape – an experiential world – which the artist is inviting us to enter. Modern contemporary artworks, from readymades, to installations and performances, make more sense if you see them as concrete instances of a particular landscape that the artist has created, and can lead you into, rather than as objects to be admired for their congruence with tradition and traditional techniques.

So, then, is it art ? If it's an object which represents an element in a strange and disturbing world created and orchestrated by an artist, then it is. If it's a standalone item, to be admired solely for its beautiful crafting, then it's not art or an artwork, it's only a crafted piece.

Overview: on the whole question of wanting to define 'art'

There isn't space here to address all the issues raised by our definition of 'art'. Our whole drift may well seem extreme, and unbalanced, and improbable, given the very real desire that pervades popular culture to equate 'art' with 'classical fine crafting'. It may also look like a simple case of self-justification, in that we have simply tried to define art according to our own desires, disregarding alternative interpretations. More to the point, if 'art' is as we say it is, why is this news to most people, especially the art professionals ?

How on earth, then, could 'art' equate only with the 'strange and disturbing' ? Surely there's more to art than that ? What about all those hundreds of hours spent in class learning how to draw, and perfecting the use of paints, and training the eye ? Surely 'art' is somewhere in that rich mix, and not in some half-arsed theory about exploring existential darkness ?

We will try to justify this whole approach by reducing it to the matter of what we want 'art' to do. From this perspective, there are only two real possibilities with art: the quest for 'beauty' – in its widest sense – or an exploration, not of its opposite, but rather of the 'dark side', the mysterious 'underbelly' of everything positive, optimistic and sunny. The quest for beauty has its own logic, and its own trajectory, and it ends, one way or another, in sublime crafting, and in dazzling technique. It is all about educating one's aesthetic sensibilities and sensitivities towards an ever deepening appreciation of the subtleties of beauty, in its myriad forms.

An exploration of the dark side of existence is something else altogether. It is more about awakening a certain very specific fascination, and then giving it room to express itself. It is about finding a way to explore the strange and disturbing, using various media, and then orchestrating the possibilities that these media offer. The great thing about art is that it offers a safe and enjoyable environment in which to contemplate all kinds of darkness, without having to submit to this negativity in life itself. Art is essentially a theatrical medium, and an entertainment; it is not real life. But like the best in theatre or cinema, it can, for a time, overwhelm you with its power.

So, in the end, if people want 'art' to equate with 'classical fine craft', rejecting other possibilities, then no one should stop them. And if people want to treat modern contemporary artworks as puzzles to be decoded, then let them go there too. But the point is that the way we have defined 'art' here reveals art to be an immersive, imaginative experience, much more interesting and involving than the fey tedium of sensorial aesthetics. And our definition makes real sense of the work of many key modern contemporary artists in a way not on offer elsewhere.

Summary:

Aesthetic craft: standalone objects, deliberately crafted by a human being, and intended to express beauty in some form

Art: crafted presentational media exploring the 'strange and disturbing'

Endnotes

¹ See Victoria Coren Mitchell's article in The Guardian, 2016.

² For a more detailed discussion of the theatrical pretence, see Zaaiman (2012).

³ 'Craft' is used here to mean any material – in any medium - worked on – crafted – by a human being, to some purpose, either utilitarian, or aesthetic. 'Craft' being a shorthand for 'crafted material', or 'crafted object'.

⁴ 'Film concret' - as a distant relative of 'musique concrète' - is meant to represent something like a special kind of avant-garde narrative medium, subtle, unsettling, and ultimately unfathomable.

⁵ For further exploration of 'art' as the realm of the strange and disturbing, see Zaaiman (2012), (2015), (2016).

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[only a representative sample; many other similar books were used in the writing of this study]

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