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# When Is Art?

Scott Robinson



OPTICAL LENSES Ashley Coble

I WAS ONE OF MANY BEWILDERED FRESHMEN **WANDERING THROUGH THE STACKS OF TEXTBOOKS** at the community college bookstore. I found the required books for English, government, American history and art appreciation. The title of the latter made me pause. What is Art? "Yes!" I thought to myself. "That makes sense. I have to have a clear definition of what art is if I'm gonna be an art major." Standing in the crowded aisle, I flung open the book and read the first sentence:

The only way to begin this book is to make clear that we are not going to arrive at any single answer to the question, What is art?

"What a rip-off!" I said to myself. "I'm not paying for this!"

The book was written by the legendary John Canaday, though I had no idea at the time who the author was. Years later I was better able to appreciate what Canaday was trying to say. Many scholars have tried to define what art is. All failed. Canaday simply dispensed with the matter and got on with what art historians generally agreed upon as the basics of art appreciation.

Some cultures have no word for art, much less a concept of artists or art museums. This does not mean they live without art. Art to them may be that blanket, this bowl or a carved idol. Taking such an object out of context and placing it on a pedestal in an art museum makes no sense in many cultures. In some cases, this would virtually destroy the object because its use as a blanket, bowl or idol is exactly what makes it art—or whatever they call it. On the other hand, there are examples of art whose purpose is not realized until the object is destroyed rather than preserved in a museum. Navaho sand paintings will not dispose of the malevolent spirits captured in the design until the artwork is gathered up and cast to the wind.

So why has every book on art appreciation, save Canaday's, attempted to define art even though the task is impossible? All the conflicting definitions make the field of art appreciation so, well, downright exacerbating. Canaday's outright dismissal of the question forced me to question how could I dedicate my entire adult life studying something that could not be defined?

Then I stumbled onto a different approach to this old problem. I was taking a doctoral course on the philosophy of music when my professor introduced me to Nelson Goodman's book on the Languages of Art. Goodman was wrestling with a much deeper philosophical issue about the nature of music, but something he said seemed to make sense of the "what is art?" question. Part of Goodman's reasoning was that music exists only as it is performed, thus he emphasized the when of music. Maybe we were asking the wrong question about art. What if we asked **when** is art rather than **what**?

This sounds rather odd at first, I admit. But it makes sense if you consider those famous words, "One small step for [a] man..." At that precise moment, humans completed a journey from prehistoric troglodytes—grunting and pointing at gods and goddesses in the heavens—to modern beings with real estate on the moon. Luckily Neil Armstrong resisted an emphatic "Hi Mom!" wave at the camera. Or grasping the gravity of the moment, he didn't look squarely at the lens and say, "Everybody on earth: this is a really, really, really, really important event in the course of human history!" That would not be an appropriate way to express the significance of the event. No, he uttered those remarkably simple yet extraordinarily poetic words we can all recite.

Now imagine the most brilliant rocket scientists sitting around a boardroom table at NASA. It is a final meeting where the last details are being wrapped up before liftoff. A blackboard behind them is crammed with hastily scrawled formulas and endless equations unintelligible to ordinary mortals.

"We've gone over the calculations again and again. We've triple-checked the test data. We've consulted the weather charts. Everything is a go. Have we missed anything?" asks the lead scientist.

There is a moment of silence. Someone in the room, rather timidly, raises a hand. "This is a really big deal you know. Shouldn't we . . . I don't know . . . do something?"

"Like what?" another responds, looking up from his slide rule.

"I don't know," the first answers. "A ceremony or something. I mean, if we pull this off, this is a pretty big deal. Shouldn't we plan to do something to mark the event?"

An even longer pause indicates a momentary loss of ideas. The most stellar minds of science gathered in one room, yet they are utterly stumped. They boldly devised a plan to forever alter mankind's relationship to the universe, but they lack the means to express the significance of the event.

"How 'bout a speech," the lead scientist suggests.

"You mean a 'Four score and twenty years ago' sort of speech?" another wonders.

"Well, yeah," the leader responds. "Something like that."

"I was once in Toastmasters," another interjected, "but I don't feel qualified to write something of this magnitude. The entire world will be watching."

They instantly realized that they had forgotten something necessary for the mission—they forgot about art.

An extraordinary occasion demands extraordinary language. Ordinary words or actions simply will not do. NASA had to look beyond the realm of science for the appropriate words, to poetry, to express the meaning of what they were about to do. NASA took ordinary language and made it extra-ordinary—poetic—so that everyone watching Neil Armstrong taking that famous step would know that what he was doing—indeed the moment we were experiencing—was significant. It had meaning.

That is when art happens.

Whenever we take something ordinary and make it extra-ordinary, we are making art. We do not normally talk in words like "One small step..." do we? Imagine giving your fast food order as, "Give me one cheeseburger with fries, hold the pickles—or give me death!" It would not make sense because ordering a cheeseburger is not a very meaningful event. Whatever is produced in this ordinary-to-extraordinary process is secondary to the human impulse to convey something meaningful. This is not so much a definition of art as it is recognition of the universal human desire to express meaning—and recognizing when it happens.

A graduate deserves a toast, which is an artful use of language. When people are married, we dress them in symbolic costumes. To honor the dead, we give the moment meaning with a eulogy. We commission monuments to mark a hallowed place where soldiers died, to commemorate a great leader, or to represent the abstract ideals of a nation. We gather for performances of dance, music, and drama not just to be entertained, but as a way of exploring what it means to be human.

Observe any important moment in the life of a person (a Bar Mitzvah, wedding, marriage, funeral) or a group of people (a declaration of war, proclamation of freedom, recognition of achievement), and art will happen. Indeed, the only way to give something any meaning whatsoever is through some form of artistic expression, be it through artful language, music, dance or the visual arts. We may not be able to define what art is, but we always know when it happens. Whenever an individual or group tries to communicate something is meaningful, that is when art happens.

Consider all the kinds of art used, for example, to perform High Mass in Saint Peter's Cathedral. Remove every form of art and see what remains. Begin with painting and sculpture. There goes Bernini's Baldacchino. What about music? No angelic chorale reverberating throughout the vaulted nave. What about dance? No choreographed movement allowed: no solemn procession, ritual kneeling, or sign of the cross on one's chest. What about literature? The Church's magnificent liturgy must go, as does the Pope's homily. As to the craft arts, there can be no bejeweled censer issuing incense or ring on the Pope's finger. There is no hand-decorated Bible at the hand-carved pulpit either. In fact, there is no furniture at all. What about interior design and architecture? The inspirational wall and ceiling mosaics disappear along with the dome designed by Michelangelo. Costume design? The uniforms created

by Michelangelo for the Swiss Guard are gone, too, along with all the distinguishing vestments of the ranking clergy. No symbols of any sort—no ichtus, no chi-rho, not even a simple cross. Nothing is left but a large group of naked people standing in a big open space. How meaningful is that?

We convey our deepest sense of individual and communal identity through artful use of language, movement, dress, sound, image, and performance.

Indeed there are no vehicles of meaning other than the arts. That is what the writer Henry Miller meant when he said, "Art teaches nothing, except the significance of life."

We may not know what art is, but every culture knows when something meaningful is being expressed: Language is no longer just words, but a bond of marriage or a right of passage into adulthood. A bowl for serving rice becomes a symbolic vessel of life-giving forces. The tattoos on one's body become more than decorative; they prove one's birthright. The next time someone suggests that art is a luxury, imagine life without artistic expression. Imagine Neil Armstrong stepping onto the lunar surface in silence.



SCULPTURE Jon Russell