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What Do We Need to Be in the Presence of Art?

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What Do We Need to Be in the Presence of Art?

Art defines us as humans. Interconnected with communication and symbolism, art is the unique act—and art is indeed an act—that distinguishes us from all other living things. Apes and monkeys can move brushes around a campus, but they do not appear to be able to depict anything that they see (Goldman, 2014). Elephants have been taught to use their proboscis to create what looks like recognizable art, but it is not art to the elephant, only to us (English, Kaplan & Rogers, 2014).

To take another example from our present moment, computers can write poetry, compose music and create visual art, but none of it matters to the computer, and so it is in an important sense, invalid (Weiner, 2018). The work created might as well be random strings of words, notes, or brush strokes. It expresses nothing of the computer but its ability to organize symbols in a way that *we* recognize. But thirty-five thousand years ago, long before we had anything like a written language, or civilization in any form by which we know that word today, cave paintings appeared in France, Spain and other places that were astonishingly advanced (Wong, 2018). They depicted animals as they appeared to our hunter-gatherer forebears, some extinct now, and some not, some of them used as food, and some not. They were depicted with grace, verve, and color and had a distinct "wroughtness." Among our ancient forebears' remains we have also found the remnants and relics of ancient mammoth bone flutes from some forty-three thousand years ago (OpenCulture.com, 2015). That date is approximately contemporaneous with some of the more elaborate cave paintings. Obviously, the music from that period is lost to us, but because of the position of the holes, we know that scales and melodies were possible with them. Therefore, we do not know which came first, music or visual art, but in each we find examples of an aesthetic.

What do I mean by "an aesthetic"? An aesthetic is a guiding principle, an idea about how and what a piece of art should look like (Oxford Living Dictionaries). It suggests choices being made. "Let us draw the horse this way, and not that." "How can I suggest depth on the two-dimensional space of a cave wall?" "What colors shall I use?" "How can this tube be cut to make more sounds?" "How can I strike this stretched deerskin to make better sounds?" These are the choices that artists have made since art began. When we all marvel at these choices, when there is some kind of common assent that successful choices have been made, there is art among us.

The roiling and poisonous political climate that we live in means that any strong assertion we make is likely to be challenged. That includes our opinions on art. Art has always excited differences of opinion. Therefore, is there any way to know what art is "good"? Do we even need to know? Isn't it just what pleases us? Do we risk being deceived by "bad" art, and can we truly be educated about it, or is what the knowledgeable consider to be art merely its own kind of illegitimate snobbery? (Park, 2017). If so, then bring on the velvet Elvis paintings, which have for a generation been a kind of shorthand for bad visual art (Spike, 2002).

Art has always served different tastes and been created for different purposes. Sometimes we call these things "high" art and "low" art (Plescher, 2013). For thousands of years, there has been doggerel along with poetry, pornography along with beautiful art, crude dumb show instead of theatre, and crude statuary in the place of sculpture. And people haven't always minded. Like many others, I laugh at stupid movies, and sing along with bad pop songs, too. We are only human. But as long as we know the difference between drivel and art, and especially between art that has non-artistic agendas and art that only seeks to ennoble us, we will turn out right.

I have a confession to make. My title can be read in more than one way. Because I like humor and word play, as many writers before me, I wrote a line that has ambivalence based on

emphasis. The title of this piece, therefore, depends on the emphasis you grant to certain internal phrases. It can be read as, "What do we need to be . . . in the presence of art?" And—"What do we need . . . to be in the presence of art?"

This essay will try to answer both of these questions. As to the first, what we need to be, when we are in the presence of art, is *hyperaware*. Because art communicates both connotative and denotative messages, and because it can evoke emotion as well as contemplation, we must agree to be open to art, in our very selves, wherever it appears (Chandler, 2017). We should be as open to its communication as we would be to the secrets of our closest friends. Serious museum goers of course know this. A new show comes in, perhaps by an artist they are less familiar with, and they unconsciously want to see what all the fuss is about. It is the same with serious concert goers and playgoers. In a way, we are rooting for the artist; we wish to laugh—if we can—at the comedy we attend, just as we wish to be sad, if only for a moment, at the high drama. We give the art a chance.

When we do this, we invariably make comparisons with the previous art that has stuck with us. Being exposed to a growing body of art deepens our appreciation of new art in us (Jacobs, 2017). The more we know art, the more we like art. I truly believe this. Even if we have never seen other 16th- and 17th-century dramas, we compare Shakespeare to . . . whatever frame of reference is available to us; the talk of pirates, perhaps, or windy English majors we have met. We form an opinion. It might well be that this opinion is that Shakespeare is not for us. But I would rather that someone came to that conclusion after having seen two or three Shakespeare plays than after seeing none at all.

I saw my first Shakespeare play in the ninth grade. It was a very good production of Hamlet with Kristoffer Tabori as the melancholy Dane (http://www.ktabori.com/actor.php[1]). I

had read the play before that, but struggled with the simple decoding of it, because the archaic English was too difficult for me to absorb all of the meaning from it. But then I saw the play, and the curtain, in both senses, fell away and I knew immediately what every actor was saying. The art of the actor had for me deeply informed the art of the literature of Shakespeare. From that day to this, my enthusiasm for this most esteemed of writers has never flagged.

But especially in our time, art exists in, and is mingled with and sponsored by many other symbolic forces in our society, including the political, the economic, and the social. Some touch on our makeup as sexual beings (Freedman, 1994), others on our role as financial actors in a marketplace (Anderson, Reckhenrich, & Kupp, 2011), or as savvy consumers of products we purchase for our wellbeing in countless ways (Dellorco, 2019). Most of these products are made known to us by advertising, which is all around us, and whose practitioners have all studied art as a kind of black magic to make their ads more attractive. I marveled a few years ago, when I was pumping gas at a service station, at the gas nozzle I held in my hand. It had an ad on it - on the very handle! - for an internet access company. That ad had been designed by some well-paid person somewhere who had studied art somewhere. Their knowledge of art had sharpened certain persuasive elements in that ad. As children often say to one another, the ad said, “See? I made you look.”

But there is something else that we need to be in the presence of art, and that is *broad-minded*. As I mentioned above, even as we drink in art that we know we will love, we need to try to appreciate art that is not necessarily to our taste. Even if the art seems to us ugly, or banal, or trivial, or incomprehensible – we should audit ourselves and ask what, if any, reaction it has evoked in us. I appreciate Mozart, for example, although I suspect I will always prefer his younger contemporary, Beethoven. But my study of the music of that period reveals to me what

strides Mozart made and how lissome and yet how structured his arrangements and melodic invention were. In the play *Amadeus*, (Shaffer, 1980) Mozart's lesser contemporary Salieri, simultaneously mortally jealous of Mozart's musical talent, yet uniquely insighted into its genius, says of one piece, "Displace one note, and there would be diminishment. Displace one phrase, and the structure would fall."

At the same time, we are free to reject art if we truly feel that it has no value, or at least no value for us. While I enjoy much twentieth century music, for example, the John Cage work *4'33"* (Lipov, 2015), which involves him sitting silently before a piano without playing a note, is something I cannot help but think is a trifle absurd. Perhaps it was meant that way, but it doesn't mean I have to spend my valuable time "listening" to it. I take a similar view to modern art that involves splashing paint randomly on a canvas and calling it abstract art. I love much abstract and abstracted art, by artists such as Picasso and Mondrian. Some of it, however, seems artless and trite to me. I acknowledge that such unconventional artists, whether Cage, or Pollock or anyone else, were probably capable of creating art that I would better like and appreciate, but needed somehow to break some kind of structural chains they felt on their expression (Shawn, 2002; Kropfinger, 1997). That said, these breakthroughs were doubtless more important to them than they have ever been to me. I temper these thoughts by pointing out that such pieces may well be very important to others, and validly so. The point is, I gave their art a chance. And, as the saying goes, you can't please everyone.

I should also say that I have been a champion of art that I believe has gone unappreciated, including film, television, poetry, and novels. A really terrific movie you almost certainly haven't seen is *The Chicken Chronicles*, with Phil Silvers (Shenson & Simon, 1977) or Marco Bellochio's *Devil in the Flesh* (Pescarolo & Bellochio, 1986). Or *Trouble in Mind*, by Alan

Rudolph (Blocker & Rudolph, 1985). Or the New Zealand movie, *The Quiet Earth* (Pilsbury, Reynolds, & Murphy, 1985). My choice for the best Steven Spielberg film is, hands down, *Empire of the Sun* (Spielberg, Kennedy, & Marshall, 1987), though people only rarely select that one. I read Anthony Trollope's Barsetshire novels (Super, 1990) long before it was trendy to do so. I have championed the criticism of Una Ellis-Fermor, Charles Lamb and W. Bodham Dunne, even as these writers fell into obscurity. You haven't lived till you have read Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* (1969), or Marguerite Duras' *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* (1986). You should read the poetry of Jack Gilbert, and the novels of Erica Ferencik (e.g. *The River at Night,* 2017), who is a personal friend.

But I also love much of the art that you *have* likely read, seen or heard as well. Loving Rembrandt, O'Keeffe, Renoir (father and son), Stravinsky, Shostakovich, and Bach is easy. They are easy to access and all have large admiration societies. But to develop as critics of art, we must develop a criticism that works for each of us, and each of us alone. We must learn from the best, but personalize our taste by engulfing ourselves in as much art as we can. We must become aficionados of art. When we do this, we learn both much more of art and much more of ourselves. And this is kind of the point, *n'est-ce pas*? This is what we need to be . . . in the presence of art.

But the second reading of my title is: What do we need . . . to be in the presence of art? It is probably true that today, much of the "art" around us exists in a significantly adulterated form. This does not always dim the attractiveness of such work. As a media scholar, I note the pleasure I feel when a particularly funny or well written commercial comes on. The Progressive and Geico Insurance commercials are, taken together, an excellent example of this. Using a large panoply of characters, including effete cavemen, the plucky Flo and timid Jamie, and of course

the iconic cockney lizard, these companies have succeeded, no doubt, in selling more insurance by making what amount to comical, serial short films (AllBestVideos, 2018; Jake's Top 10, 2018).

But what do we need to identify, in order to identify something as Art, writ large? I believe that this is to ask what we need to identify something as "pure art," and in our age, that is an increasingly difficult question, because it is increasingly difficult to find art made purely to be publicly appreciated and for no other reason. Most commercial films and television shows, even ones that take artistic chances and are reportedly not subject to significant compromise, are nonetheless created in mediums where making money is the first consideration. So unless one is a small, completely independent filmmaker or television producer, genuflection in the direction of the purple of commerce is probably necessary. It is likely the case, by this definition, that nearly every piece of fictional media that we see has been altered by commercial considerations somewhere along the line. Rare exceptions may exist in the tentative outings that one can view by students in film schools, or in films funded by charitable foundations.

The reason for this is probably the helical intertwining of democracy and capitalism in the United States, and our traditional suspicion of government becoming involved in funding art (Jarvik, 1997). Whereas in other developed democracies it is quite a regular and ordinary thing for art to be publicly sponsored, we are leery in this country of our tax dollars being used to support art of which we may not personally approve (Myung-Ok Lee, 2017). The difficulty with this position is that, as a result, any art that is created is a product of an economic engine of some sort. Fewer than ten (depending on how you count them) vast media companies now provide us with the bulk of our music, movies and books (Lutz, 2012). These creative products are often quite good, quite effective, and quite absorbing. They are sometimes very "artistic." But they are

guarded behind paywalls, available only with paid subscription, or in protected disc form that cannot be copied for nineteen dollars and ninety-five cents, thank you very much. Even new art that is *not* the product of our media companies is usually only available at museums and concert halls at considerable cost, or at galleries, where one may purchase the piece one loves for thousands of dollars. This is the price we pay—literally—to *not* have the government invest our funds in artists, many of whom may be very worthy. Our philosophy in this regard has cost us dearly, indeed.

Assume, however, that you have stumbled upon a painter, sculptor, songwriter, or novelist that you believe possesses unusual talent. How do you know? What do you need . . . to be in the presence of Art, with a capital A? Art shouts. It may shout quietly, but it bleats, and entreats, and grabs one by the lapels and won't let go. It fills one with admiration, or sorrow, or great joy. Here and there, I have been in the presence of true art. It can come in unexpected places, as all love seems to. During auditions for a play I was directing, I heard an audition that to this day is easily the best audition I have ever heard, for any play, anywhere. The Muses breathed air into this young actor's throat and what came forth was sheer poetry. Another time, I was testing microphones in a recording studio, and I asked students to speak into each mic. One girl began singing softly, and it was so beautiful, so keening and aware that I ended up recording the whole song and getting an accompanist for her. Unexpected places, indeed.

We have no record of John Barrymore's Hamlet; all we have are the heartfelt and thoughtful attestations of other actors who beheld the performance. Among them is the recently deceased John Gielgud, himself one of the greats. He regarded the Barrymore Hamlet to be the finest he had ever seen—and he had seen many great actors perform this role (Croall, 2000). We should probably believe him. It is said that when Beethoven conducted his *Eroica* for the first

time, the audience was so stunned that Beethoven was concerned that they did not like the piece (Gibbs, 2006). But it was so powerful, and yet so advanced, that they probably needed time to digest it. It is widely regarded now as one of his (many) masterpieces.

Sometimes art can overcome us in more subtle ways. We revisit a work we have dismissed, and find that it has a wonderful quality that we had overlooked. It may well be true that as we change in our lives, from callow youths to more mature sages, (or from idealistic young people to cynical codgers!), we find that our tastes change as well. Hopefully, though, we remain cognizant of what first bound us to certain works of art, and retain something of the youthful enthusiasm for an artist—no matter who he or she is—that we can paint that feeling onto other art that we encounter. Art, because it springs anew, keeps us young and gracile as well. And that is what art . . . needs to be.

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I believe that the title of Jessica Whitelaw's piece "I Never Learned to Swim" speaks volumes because after having read the poem to which it is attached, we marvel that one so attuned to the perturbations of water should not have this skill. The poem took me to Nova Scotia, where I have never been in real life, and brought me to imaginary shores. It was a descriptive pleasure.

It is a well-known truth that death rounds life, and we have this in full measure in Renee Schatteman's "Inheritances." Renee has graced these pages several times before, and we are glad to provide this latest glimpse into her point-of-view. She contemplates that the dead leave their genetic mark on the living and it is part of the richness of humanness that this is so.

At this time, I want to use my only slightly bully pulpit to invite interested readers to submit work to this online journal. We take musical pieces, photography, short films (under five

minutes), poetry, short stories, and one act plays. We are peer-reviewed, and if I do say so myself, we have revealed many great talents to the world, and been secretly gleeful that we have done this. We like to think of ourselves as contenders in literacy and art, and vessels for some of the purer art I speak of above in my essay. Please consider supporting us by sending us your work. Thank you.

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