

ART is ...

I will consider three different definitions of art.

The first definition is: Art is the transmission of an intentional emotion from creator to receiver. Buying this definition requires, I think, that one buy into the following corollaries:

a. It's only Art if the emotion received is that which was sent. If Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicks seven cans of paint on to a canvas and, upon looking at it, I see God and am overcome with emotion, it is still not art because the emotion I received was not sent by the "artist." An "artist" is not permitted to say, "I don't know what it means, that is for others to discover." Because the message was not thereby sent.

One can argue that there are those through whom art flows from some transcendent artist who originates and sends the emotional message. Any one making that claim would then be required to disavow the title of "artist" for himself and take on the designation of "paint brush," or "pen hand," or some such. In "Escher on Escher," (given by Einar, concerning the etcher) Escher says, upon being told that one of his pictures well depicts reincarnation, "Perhaps one can symbolize without knowing it." Interesting that, elsewhere, Escher seems to distance himself from the term "artist," and seems more comfortable being thought of as a craftsman ("with a heart"). He seems to agree that accidental emotional content does not confer on him the title of artist.

b. It's not Art if nobody gets it. The emotion must be received in order for a work to be "art." I believe this also means that art is not an either/or proposition. It can be "a bit art" if only a few people get it. It seems there should be some distinction between "getting it" (ie. receiving a genuine emotion) and merely enjoying it. I say this because I refuse to think of "Louie, Louie," great as in is, as one of the world's great works of art. If enjoyment is the only key then we can measure the greatness of a work by an opinion poll. I'm enough of a snob to find that problematic. (A similar logic would lead us to electing Boone's Farm as one of the all-time great wines. Similarly problematic)

c. It becomes Art when somebody (anybody?) gets it. A painting hangs unappreciated and un-understood for a hundred years until the first perceptive soul sees it for the emotional statement that it is and is moved by it. At that moment it becomes art.

d. The etching on the caves of France, beautiful as they are, are not art, or if they are, we have no way of knowing that they are. As far removed as we are from the reality of the people that rendered those works, we cannot possibly assume that the emotion we derive from them is the emotion the painter wanted to convey. For starters, our experiences of the pieces are conditioned by the mere passage of time -- we are awed partly by their antiquity -- which is an attribute of the paintings that their creator could not have remotely imagined.

Much of what I'm arguing as following inevitably from the definition of art suggests that I have serious reservations about the logical consistency of the precise definition. So now I'd like to modify point #1 above so that Art requires only that an emotion be received and not that it be

necessarily the same as the emotion sent, or even that any emotion message was intended at all. Then Mrs. Leary's cow, MC Escher and cave dwellers can all make Art.

So we are left with the heart of the definition: Art is about the communication of emotions (presumably in contrast to the communication of factual information, for which Art is often a poor choice.) Maintaining the sense of the definition, and not quibbling, takes me to the second definition of art: "Art is what I like." If I look at it and an emotion is transmitted then (irrespective of the creator's intention) it *is* art. If I look at it and receive no emotional message, then it is not art. Based, then, on a definition that I believe was trying to confer some objectivity on the concept of "art" I arrive at the conclusion that art is entirely subjective.

A way out is to assume that only those who are suitably tuned in (which probably means "suitably trained") are capable of deciding what is good art, or what is good wine. The rest of the untutored masses are only capable of saying what they like or don't. Some avenues of communication – ballet and opera come to mind – usually require some familiarity on the part of the consumer. This is the way of the critic and it bears some merit. This all resonates intriguingly with a slogan of mine, largely derived (though not, I think, explicitly quoted) from the book "Godel, Escher, and Bach": *Intelligence is the ability to perceive similarities in differences.* Someone to whom, "it all sounds" (or "they all look") the same, is manifestly ignorant of the phenomenon under discussion. It is a fairly general observation of mine that the inability to distinguish differences -- between individuals, blues songs, arias, or cubist paintings -- is the hallmark of the outsider, the novice, the untutored. Anyone who starts a critique, as I might of rap music, by saying, "It all sounds/looks the same to me," is not worth listening to, except to get an outsider's limited view. This leads to the conclusion that effort applied to familiarizing oneself with an area will pay off in deeper and more satisfying, enriched and enriching understanding of that area. We are being drawn to the third definition of Art: "Art is what the critics tell you it is," because only critics -- the trained cognoscenti -- are in a position to decide what is truly worthwhile. Most of "know" that Picasso, Shakespeare and Mozart are "good" because we have been told so.

We can study art to learn what elements have been successful in conveying emotions in the past so that a would-be artist can acquire a bag of tricks that have worked before, so that s/he might be more likely to evoke the desired emotion. "What works" may be fairly objective and predictable (at least in a given place and time) but the status of "art" can only be conferred, subjectively, by the eye of the beholder.

Oddly enough this is in almost perfect analogy with my view of gods. If they work for you then they are real; if they don't then they're not.