

## Arts

Music, literature, theatre, dance, painting, poetry, sculpture and various forms of visual arts all occupy the space in our society which we describe as the Arts. This space is ever evolving and expanding to include many diverse forms of art for instance street art in the form of graffiti and urban dance performances. This may be observed as a reflection of the simultaneous change in and impact of social and cultural attitudes about what constitutes a work of art and consequently where its true home rests, in other words where art ought to be displayed or appreciated.

Many philosophers, art historians and scholars have attempted to define what a work of art is. In so doing, they endeavour to categorize and place parameters to create a space where we can classify what characteristics an object must possess to be deemed a work of art. Surely, however what we understand to be a work of art is immersed in our own specific interpretation which may be born from our own particular cultural background and heritage.

If we think for instance of the case of the continent of Africa; in some African countries they have the same word for art and play. Indeed, the concept of a work of art rarely exists as it is more commonly connected with a social function usually a religious or social ceremony. So, too is the distinction drawn between the performer or artist and their audience. In observing tribal ritual ceremonies it is often difficult to distinguish between the performer and the public as everyone participates in the performance, joining in the playing instruments and dancing. This notion echoes the now infamous question posed by the Irish Nobel prize winning poet and playwright W. B Yeats in the final stanza of his classic poem *Among Schoolchildren*:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Perhaps the blurring of boundaries between the performer and performance could be considered to be in a state of constant flux. In a similar way our notion of what the arts represent ought to be considered as an individual relationship between one and the other and as such is open to negotiation. The Spanish writer and literary critic Ortega y Gasset in his essay *The Dehumanization of Art* believed that modernist art in every field from painting to literature was essentially unpopular with the 'masses'. Consequently, it is essentially elitist and exclusive to a small minority of society.

And yet why are what are essentially minority arts preferences among society privileged above and often perceived as superior to what may be labelled as 'low-brow' cultural pursuits where the word 'arts' seems to be replaced by 'entertainment'?

Why indeed is one object or activity given superior status over another? Can a work of art gain universal acceptance across cultures like for instance Leonardo de Vinci's *The Mona Lisa* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? Or are they

culture bound or indeed as the identity of the individual and his or her culture is not a static entity it may be fair to suggest that our appreciation over time of particular piece of art may change dramatically. We could ask ourselves how are our musical tastes may vary perhaps quite dramatically from our adolescent to our golden years.

The British literary critic John Carey tackles some of these questions in his razor sharp incisive book 'What are the Good Arts?' His liberal definition of a work of art is appealing in its inclusive nature. He describes a work of art 'as anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that person'.

The response of the individual; the reader, listener or viewer may differ from one to the next. In considering the psychology of the arts, Kreidler acknowledges that a response to work of art may be extremely subjective. Certainly personal associations and past experiences play an enormous part in how we may rate a certain work of art. A country's literature for example is seeped in the stories, legends and folklore which have been passed from one generation to the next. It is a shared heritage accessible only to those from the same place, which not only may re-affirm cultural ties with one's nation may but may have the negative impact of excluding others.

Art critics Gombrich and Freedberg argue that perception and reception are grounded on certain shared 'truths'. In the words of Freedberg (1989: 23) 'we proceed in the belief that however much we intellectualize, even if that notion is spontaneous there still remains a basic level of reaction that cuts across historical, social and other contextual boundaries. It is at precisely this level-which pertains to our psychological, biological and neurological status as members of the same species – that our cognition of images is allied with that of all men and women.'

It may seem trite and glib to a purist but the expression, 'I don't know much about art but I know what I like' encapsulates perhaps the spontaneous response of the general public and if we are more inclusive to this possible reality particularly in a time of increased movement of people from all around the globe to our shores, bringing their own unique personal and cultural understandings and appreciation of the arts we have the inimitable opportunity to share our diverse expressions of the human spirit through the cultural fusions of arts.

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