

Practical Aesthetics:

A Solution to a Philosophical Challenge from a Practitioner of Fine Art

Raboy, Asher

Music Department, Pacific Union College

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Art is everywhere. In America, we spend a lot of money, both private and public, on art. We debate about it, use it as a political football, and even identify our clans by our art. But for all the noise, we really can't discuss it in a productive manner, because we talk at cross-purposes. We have no universally accepted definition of art. And we need to define what it is, so that we will know how to fund it, how to educate for it, even how to protect our children from it. We must have a shared vocabulary.

When I was a young music student, I heard of a composition written at the Eastman School of Music. If memory serves, the work went something like this: one performer rode a bicycle to downtown Rochester, another took the bus, another walked and another drove a car, all to the same end location.

I was skeptical about this piece. I couldn't see how anyone could call this music. In fact I was quite sure that no one could call it art.

And yet my theory teacher, a very bright and energetic guy, was extremely enthusiastic. It certainly was art as far as he was concerned, and good art at that. This caused quite a dilemma for me. I was young and, with the confidence of youth, absolutely sure of my opinions. At the same time I had huge respect for my teacher. How could two smart, well-informed people have such opposite views? That conundrum got me thinking.

The problem was not one of intelligence, it was one of definition. A lot of ink has been used writing about aesthetics. Plato spent much time on the subject; as did the great Germans (Kant, Hegel, et. al), the modernists, post modernists, deconstructionists, and so on. And yet, when I am in the middle of a performance (as musician or audience member), I don't recognize my experience in their words. That is because they were not writing about art as I have lived it. The word "art" means something very different to them. That is to be expected, since words can have many meanings, acknowledge and implied. But it is not very useful if one wants to discuss a trip to the museum or a visit to the theater.

People spend their lives surrounded by art. Music is everywhere from the grocery store to our iPod. Theater is just as present, not always live, but often in its modern incarnations; television and the movies. The visual arts call to us from public sculptures, murals and magazine advertisements. There is good and bad art, high and low, commercial and personal – we can categorize it in many ways – but, no matter how we divide it, art is everywhere. It is everywhere, but clearly defined nowhere.

How do we build a consistent system of thought when nothing is clearly defined? Mathematicians have been doing this since the Greeks first sailed the Mediterranean. Euclid designed an axiomatic system in which the whole planer world follows logically from some primitive (or undefined) concepts and a few fundamentals propositions. The trick was choosing the axioms – they must accurately describe the world to be of any use. For example, Euclid tells us that

parallel lines never meet, and he gets a flat world. Change this axiom, you are not wrong, you just live on a sphere or in a hyperbolic universe.

Let's examine the experience of Art. In order to do this, we need a first axiom. Axiom One: *art is fundamentally experiential*. It is not hard to justify this postulate; we can show its aptness through analogy. Ask the clichéd question, "If a tree falls in the woods, does it still make a sound?" the answer would be "Yes, it makes a sound, but it cannot make music. Why? Because sound is a product of nature and music is a product of humanity." Perhaps this sounds like a fuzzy assertion, the kind stereotypically associated with the humanities, but how the brain processes music is a hot topic in the hard sciences, with new work being done in neuroscience, psychology and linguistics. One thing current research makes clear is that music is a function of the brain. All sound is vibrating air, but the brain identifies some sub-set of these vibrations and calls it music. It then processes these music-specific vibrations in a very different way than it does all other sounds, using much more of the brain. It is this extra processing that transforms some noise into song. In other words, without a listener, there is no music; music requires an encounter. One can reason analogously about the other artistic disciplines and come to a more general conclusion (a rewording of Axiom One): *Art exists only in experience*.

Axiom two: *a human being is required to create a work of art*. Most of us have seen sunsets that are beautiful or cherished views from a mountain top that touch us in profound ways. Nonetheless, being beautiful is not enough to make something art. (Nor, if something is ugly, is it forbidden from being art.) Art is a human

endeavor. Cave paintings may be art; cave walls without paintings may be beautiful, but are not art.

Some will say that chimpanzees have made interesting and beautiful paintings. Those who wish to study non-human creative activity are free to change this axiom. Some may also point to computer-generated art as a subject worthy of study, and it is.

But the public interest is really in human culture, and therefore we can arbitrarily limit our discussion to *homo sapiens*. Remember a change of axiom does not move us from truth to falsehood; it simply alters the world that we are describing.

Let's call this creator of art the *artist*. For the time being, let's leave the word *artist* as a primitive term, meaning an undefined, fundamental concept. It's actually a slippery word and will need more attention, but for this paper, we shall accept it as is. This leads us to a very simple restatement of the second axiom: *All art is created by one or more individuals. We call these individuals artists.*

Axiom Three (which comes directly from the axiom one): *Art is experienced by one or more individuals. We call these individuals the audience. The audience is another word that must be left as a primitive term for the time being. Now we will merely acknowledge that the audience and artist may be one and the same; they may be contemporaries; or they may be separated by time and space.*

Of course, these three axioms still don't tell us much about the encounter between artist and audience. What is the nature of the interaction? Clearly art is some form of communication between the creator and the observer. This does not

mean the exchange of ideas is the motivation for every artist. A painter may simply like the feel of the brush or the smell of paint. A novelist may be dreaming of immortality. But motive is irrelevant. What matters is the result. And so, put in its simplest form, a successful artistic encounter always involves a transfer of information.

The transferred information comes in many forms. It may or may not be intellectual; it could be, but is not necessarily, verbal. Some if it is emotional, some more primal than that. Humans are complicated beings; therefore communication occurs in many ways. The carrier of the message may be the content, the form, the proportions, or any other aspect of the artwork. In addition the artist may not even be conscious of all (or any) of the information that an artwork contains.

The most important aspect of this transfer of information is that communication does not travel in only one direction. It is reciprocal. An artist might think that if she fills her creation with meaning, any person (or, at least, a person literate in that art form) will simply receive her message. Nothing could be further from the truth. Audience members perceive a work through the filter of their own experiences, knowledge, prejudices, interests, culture and so on. They may discover a meaning entirely different from the artist's intent. In other words, the audience's experience changes the work of art.

For example, imagine you are an ancient Greek citizen, seeing Euripides' play, *The Trojan Women*. Your experience is something that a twenty-first century American cannot imagine. Troy might be recent history to you, not near-myth as it is today. As an ancient Greek you would accept gender roles without knowing or

caring that we moderns might find them anathema. The same goes for attitudes towards war, conquest, strength, power, and basic values. So the plot would resonate very differently for an ancient Greek than a member of a modern theater audience.

Not all messages are carried by the plot. Can a modern American experience Euripides's language in the same way as an ancient Greek? What would a native speaker of classical Greek feel when hearing the play? Beauty? Harshness?

One could guess the answers, and still, none of us could have a reaction to this play that would be at all similar to the response of that earliest of audience members.

Now let us take this thought experiment one step further. Imagine a modern American audience member seeing the same play in a good, accurate, modern translation, but with a staging that duplicates that very first production, complete with masks, platform shoes, instruments, and singing or chanting. Would that audience member find it weird? Antique? Could she even pay attention to the words, or would she miss the nuances of war and gender, engaged, instead, by the staging? After viewing this play with our modern morals and cultural experiences, it's pretty clear that the ancient and modern audience would have experienced two very different plays, even though the text and the production are fundamentally the same.

Thus the work of the artist cannot be divorced from the culture and experiences of the audience member. An audience's expectations and beliefs color

the meaning of the work of art. Communication, by definition, goes two ways. In art, the artist speaks first; the audience responds and concludes.

Now we uncover the next part of our practical definition of art: *Art is a conversation between artist and audience in which the artist speaks first and the audience member responds and concludes.*

If we settled on the above statement as our definition of art, we could find many examples of communication that fits our definition but certainly are not art. In other words, our definition is still incomplete. We will need another axiom. In order to find this axiom, let's look at one more example.

The other day I was assembling a gas grill. Someone had written instructions, thus sharing information with me although we were separated by time and space. I read those instructions and went about assembling the grill. It was clear that I, the audience, had grafted my own interpretation on the author's message, and not always for the better. The jumble that was to become my grill was testament to the kind of two-way communication mentioned above. So, are these instructions art? Of course they are not, but why not? Here comes the fourth axiom: *Artistic communication is done by metaphor.* Metaphor is another primitive term, and, once again, we'll probably wish to explore it later. But for now, we'll accept it on face value.

To look at an example: a writer of prose could compose an essay, telling us facts, in no uncertain terms, that the author wants us to know. As readers, we may still misunderstand the message, but it is delivered in an expository fashion, not through metaphor. Therefore, the intention is direct communication. Alternately, a

writer could choose to pen a novel, giving us characters, a setting, and a plot that communicate the ideas indirectly.

Now have a complete definition of art.

Art is something that is created by one or more individuals. We call these individuals artists. In addition, art is experienced by one or more individuals. We call these individuals the audience.

Art is a conversation between artist and audience in which the artist speaks first and the audience responds and concludes.

The conversation is an unusual one in that the artist speaks primarily through metaphor.

To conclude: this is not the only possible definition of art, however it is a very good one for public discourse. It accurately describes the actual art experience and allows us to have the tools to discuss and judge the impact of artistic experience on society. This definition gives some surprising perspectives. It values the presentation of an artwork as much as it values the original creation. When judging either the meaning or value of a work of art, our definition requires respect for the opinions of the audience, although it does not demand unthinking relativism. Let's go back to *The Trojan Women*, and use it as a case study to derive our first theorem.

The Trojan Women has been the basis of much great art. On the other hand, *Trojan Women* is probably not great art when spoken in Greek, without staging or costume, to an English-speaking audience. Try to convince a theater full of non-Greek speakers that the hours of unintelligible sounds are great art. Very little information is being shared no matter how much content was infused into the play

by Euripides. This gives us our first theorem: *art needs to be in a form that its audience can appreciate, and it needs to be matched with an audience that has the skills and desire to receive it.*

This example comes from the lively arts, but the theorem transfers to the rest or the art world. The experientialism mentioned above is equally true with an art form that is minimally interpreted, such as painting. The artistic event (audience viewing a painting) may happen hundreds of times a day, and each time, art is created anew, as each observer reconstructs the piece through her own experience. All creations still need to be matched with their appropriate audience to really be experienced as Art.

I once cherished the hope that one could derive an entire aesthetic system from just these few axioms. Wouldn't that be elegant! But, sadly, humanity is more complex than that. We find that if we study *the artist*, that simple word represents a complex web of creators and needs some postulates of its own. *The audience* is even more complex, because audiences do not behave rationally. Within any audience, there are trendsetters, followers and independent thinkers. Indeed, art seems to be a mechanism through which people define their clan and tribe. There are contradictory longings for familiarity and novelty, complexity and simplicity. All of this can be dealt with and understood. However, it will take another paper to treat *the audience* and *the artist* with the same rigor that we are treating art itself. Once we have done this, the public will be able to use a shared vocabulary for its discourse on art.

Even with our incomplete system, we can now begin to make aesthetic and commercial judgments. Let's look at the example that opened this paper, the musical composition based on four travelers in Rochester. Was this piece art, was it important to society, and should we support it (financially or otherwise)? First, let me say that one can't call an opus "art" simply because it was composed, or even, performed. In this particular case, if it wasn't also described, it isn't art. Why? Because no one can witness the performance (because of its special requirements), and no one could experience it by description if no description exists. Therefore, it would have no audience. No audience means no communication; no conversation; no art. (One could make an argument that the composer and the performers were the audience, but the creator and the interpreters would know the piece by description.)

Of course, it was described or I wouldn't know about it. And, indeed, in all ways required by our definition, the artist completed the job – information has been sent to the audience in the form of a metaphor. (Metaphor: since the travels of the four performers tell a story, not of travel, but of the nature of randomness, of rhythm, of simultaneity, and of the nature of art and its place in society.) But that is only half of the definition of art. In order for this event to be art, for it to claim its place on to the top of Parnassus, there has to be a conversation with an audience. Does that happen? It depends entirely on who the audience is.

Since we called this music, we can imagine an audience of regular symphony attendees. We can't say for sure, but it is likely that they would expect sound, maybe even melody or harmony, and expect the work to be contained in a concert hall.

Although these suppositions can't be tested, I suspect that the majority of this audience would get little out of the piece. There may be puzzlement or boredom, but very little information would change hands. The artists and the audience are speaking different languages. The performance described above is not art according to our definition, or, at best, very bad art. On the other hand, if the audience were made up of a certain subset of academics (say, philosophers, literary theorists or music theorists), the messages of this piece may find fertile ground. Then it certainly is art. Because we have not investigated the primitive terms *artist*, *audience* and *metaphor*, we cannot make value judgments. What we have now are the tools to make decisions about commerce, which translates quite literally into deciding if this project has value to our society.

Here are some assumptions: if an experience touches a large audience in a meaningful way, then the project will likely get funded due to the simple rules of capitalism. People pay for what they like, and large numbers of people who pay often means profit to the creators (and others, such as producers, etc.). The Rochester composition, of course, reaches a small audience, and art whose audiences are smaller cannot rely on capitalism. These projects may need financial help to survive. Of course, it is not always appropriate to give that help. Why should one individual pay (even if it is through tax dollars) for art aimed at someone else?

We, as a society, have consistently felt that funding the creation of original ideas is a valuable use of some of the public's resources – this is why we have research universities and not just teaching colleges. We have also consistently, as a society, valued scientific, technical, and medical research over discoveries made in

the humanities. Philosophers and their works simply don't earn the same dollars as biologists looking for a cure cancer.

The Rochester composition was cheap to compose and produce. It is a perfect match for the way society views the humanities. It shares original thoughts on the nature of art with the community of those who care, but takes only the appropriate resources from society to achieve these ends.

Thus we have a clear conclusion. This Rochester work has a place, and even deserved the measure of support it got. So, have I changed my mind about the piece? Absolutely not. As a person who has a passion for musical performance, the sound (or lack there of) leaves me cold. As a lover of aesthetics, the metaphors seem obvious and uninteresting. But this piece wasn't written for me. Because of my outlook on life, this work is all Greek to me. I am not part of the chosen few who will appreciate its brilliance. My teacher is.

This is only the start of a complete theory of aesthetics that will be presented over the next year in subsequent papers. I hope that, from this brief glimpse into the workings of this system, you can see the potential utility of it, and understand how having this system in place can inform and empower the public debate on art, it's value and funding.

Respectfully Submitted

Asher Raboy