

## Concerning the Nature of Art

From Keifer-Boyd, K. & Maitland-Gholson, J. (forthcoming) *Expose, Explode, Empower: Visual Culture Explorations in Art Education*. Davis Publication.



Figure 1: West Texas Windmill

**INSTRUMENTALISM:** One very important idea about art is that it should serve a purpose. This is sometimes called functionalism. It is often said that the ancient Greeks had no word for art, but rather, their closest equivalent was the notion of craft. To this way of thinking, objects always served a purpose. Extending this idea further, “good” objects of craft were the ones that served their function best. Of course, this way of thinking begs the question: Can the sole purpose of an object be to give aesthetic pleasure? Certainly the Greeks intended their beautiful functional objects to also be admired for their beauty.

This brings us to a parallel way of thinking about art that is very pervasive in contemporary thought—art as craft. In Western culture we are enamored of “well-crafted” things, things that reflect high levels of technical skill. So, for example, comments made at an art show or gallery will make reference to the skill of the artist. The infamous put-down: “I could do that!” implies a presumed lack of skill. This suggests a belief that only a selectively trained few who have very specialized skills produce “worthy” objects.

There is a third idea related to instrumentalism. It is the idea that art must be the unique product of an individual artist, not mass-produced. So, in some peoples’ minds, if an object is machine-made, it automatically cannot qualify as art.

When sorting objects into art and not art categories, some learners will raise the idea that art requires special technical skill and that art cannot be mass-produced. But how can this revelation of assumptions influence one’s view of the larger visual culture? Often, pervasive visual images are off-handedly regarded as not worthy of focused attention because they are seen as strictly utilitarian, *none art*. To this way of thinking, art is made for the purpose of critical attention. Billboards, magazine photos, Web sites are not. They may be admired for their clever design or as technical marvels, but because they are seen as technology-driven for the purpose of advertising, they may not be seen as worthy of thoughtful consideration.

Do you believe that art requires special technical skill or that art cannot be mass-produced?



**IMITATIONALISM:** There is a strong belief among many viewers of art that the purpose of art is to imitate life in a way that recreates the experience we would have if encountering the real-life experience being interpreted by the art work. This idea comes in many forms. Again, in listening to the comments of other art viewers, you may hear great praise being given to a work because it “looks so real.” This is often associated with the artist’s technical skill in creating an image that looks exactly as the thing would appear in three-dimensional space. BUT the word “realism” can have many implications. There have been art movements that defined the best art as that which presents something as it looks in nature (naturalism). Others consider

Figure 2: Jolie Madame (1972), oil on canvas, 71" x 96" From Vanitas Series by Audrey Flack

the most important purpose of art to be presenting an image in it's grittiest social context. For example, photo-like images of homeless people (social realism) that stir people to empathy and action. Others, still, have valued works that present something that looks the way we would "really" like it to be (idealism). To complicate matters, there is an art "ism" called surrealism, which presents images, often from one's dreams, that look real but are physically impossible in the "real world."

Does the "realistic" quality of the work give it greater value in your eyes?

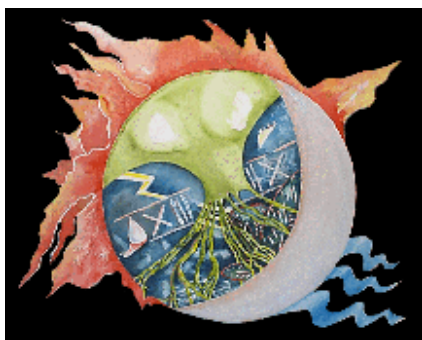


Figure 3: Fire, Earth, Air, Water (1999) by Karen Keifer-Boyd watercolor, 24" x 36"

**EXPRESSIONISM:** Another BIG idea about art is that it must express emotion. Often when viewers of art take this point of view, they often assume that everyone understands what they mean. However, just as with ideas like "It shows skill" or "It looks so real," there may be several subtle beliefs underlying a statement like, "This is art because it expresses emotion." For example, we might want to ask, whose emotion? Has the artist communicated to you an emotion he or she was feeling? Or did the artist arouse an emotion in you that you did not know was there? Often artists who are called expressionists, use very bold color or lines to actually exemplify the physical energy they were feeling when they made the work.

If what the art is doing is communicating an emotion, that can be viewed as instrumental. That is, the purpose of art becomes sending a message, even teaching. This moves our thoughts into another arena--didacticism: art that is intended to teach. A good example of this is the stained glass windows of medieval churches that were intended to teach religious lessons in pictures to those who could not read.

In what ways might the assumption that art is *expression* influence one's viewing of visual cultural images? Visual culture is filled with emotional and didactic messages. But if we believe we only have to reflectively attend to such messages when delivered through art, then the messages delivered through the pervasive visual culture take effect without our conscious attention.



Figure 4: Untitled (1996) by Clea Verven

**FORMALISM:** Viewers, often off-handedly, refer to art as "modern art" or "abstract art." Ironically, these "abstract" works were originally intended by artists to be very directly communicative, even though novice viewers often scratch their heads and say, "What is it?" (Of course, this indicates a viewer for whom realism is the primary defining factor.) Ironically, many artists whose work does not have representational subject matter were attempting to use color (bright, harsh, subtle, dark or light), line (smooth, flowing, jagged, thick or delicate), texture (soft, hard, fluffy, sharp), and so forth, to communicate direct, visceral emotion.

This way of thinking has been called formalism because the idea is that the formal design qualities in the work itself (color, line, texture and many others) come together to create harmony, unity, and interest in the viewer. These responses in the viewer are called the aesthetic response. So, often, what is sometimes referred to as aesthetics, is actually an analysis of how design qualities in the work itself create a certain response in a viewer. Of course, this is only one aesthetic theory about how art arouses response. There are many other theories about why viewers respond to art that place an emphasis on non-design aspects in a piece of visual communication.

Texas Tech University, Art Dept.

Some people insist that a particular object is art because someone had put conscious thought into the visual qualities of the thing. This is a formalist perspective. The form of the object creating an aesthetic response is the indicator that it is art. How does this kind of thinking influence one's attention to the visual culture? If one is attuned to visual design elements, he or she will be drawn to print and media images since most contemporary visual designers have been trained to manipulate an audiences aesthetic response by using line, color, texture, balance, etc. to create harmony, unity, and visual interest.



Figure 5: Lynn Hull's Bird Garden (1991)

**CONTEXTUALISM:** There are many other factors beside design that influence our response to visual art and visual experience in general. Factors such as the setting in which visual work is placed, the societies and cultures from which the artist and viewer come, the unique experiences of the viewer, the intentions of the maker—these all provide layers of context that influence how a viewer interprets the work.

If, when faced with labeling something art or not art, one tends to constantly say, "It depends", then he or she might be called a contextualist. Likewise, if one wants to call everything "art" because, under certain circumstances, everything could be art, he or she is thinking contextually. They feel that the circumstances that surround a thing are important in defining it.

How does this perspective relate to seeing and interpreting the larger visual culture? Some people define art as visual culture. That is, objects that are created within a particular culture tell you many things about the experiences, values, and beliefs of the people of that culture. That is, in their view, the definition of art.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER.** Because art is a human construct—an idea dreamed up by human beings to begin with, does art require a human maker? Would you include a flower, a sea shell or a sunset as art? One possible way of thinking about this question would be to say that both human made and natural objects have qualities that stimulate aesthetic response without necessarily being art. Others might want to say that a superior consciousness created the flower, sea shell or sunset and therefore, "the artist."

Another point of discussion often arises when we talk about art. Sometimes there are sorters who would like to create a continuum of "Less likely to be art" to "More likely to be art" or, a clear hierarchy of less valued art to more valued art. At one end they might place a functional piece of pottery, perhaps mass-produced. At the other end might be daVinci's *Mona Lisa*. We might enter this discussion by saying that there has long been a discussion of the distinctions between craft and fine art which might make value distinctions between works of pottery, jewelry, glass, etc, and paintings, drawings and etched or lithographed print. Photography and film may be categorized by some as a craft, by others as art forms. This discussion often expands into a distinction between "high art" and the "popular arts."

For our purposes, it should be apparent by now that we are not interested in pinning down any ultimate definition of art. Rather, we want to bring to light the many possible underlying beliefs about art, particularly visual art because these beliefs fuel general attitudes, often unexamined, that greatly influence the way we engage, respond to, and interpret all kinds of visual communication.

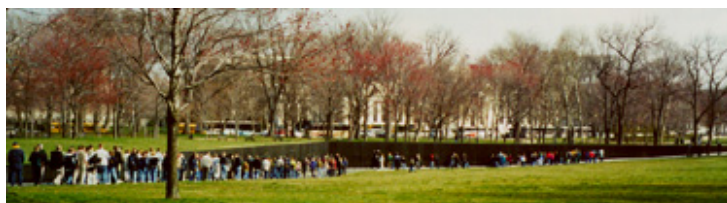


Figure 6: Vietnam Veterans Memorial "The Wall" by Maya Lin, 1991

## Photograph: Karen Keifer-Boyd, 1999

Regarding the question of "who cares?" It is not finally agreeing upon a single definition that is important in this exercise. Participants who are very "product oriented" rather than "process oriented" may feel cheated if there is not a clear end goal. To these participants we would explain that the goal IS process. What is important is that you identify the biases you hold for thinking in certain ways about how to value or devalue a wide variety of visual experiences. We would contend that critical visual thinking requires an initial grounding in one's own starting point.

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