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Critical Theory One: Revelations

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An Artist’s Plight of Perception

How important is public perception in the creation of art within the confines of a dynamic culture? As an artist I had always believed staying true to oneself, shielded from outside influences and creating with no regard to outside opinions was the epitome of being an artist. I carried with me the assertation that art should be timeless and more about depicting my most personal thoughts than considering social or cultural mores. It has become evident that more investigation of perception and what that word means as both an artist and person is required.

While perceptional consideration may be an integral part of the artistic process, considering the question, “What is art?” should be addressed. “Art, as we understand it is created by an artist who has absolute authority over the work. Art in the modern era is not something commanded by papal decree but is more because the creator is compelled to do so.” (Staniszewski, 43) This is a statement heard throughout history in support of the lonely artist stewing about in a studio with only their thoughts and materials showing complete disregard for any sort of monetary compensation or garner of attention. But, artists for all their otherworldly talents are also human. “Art may occupy the realm of the spirit, but artists do not. They have bodies as well as souls and bodies make their gross demands. In plainer language, artists have to eat.” (Deresiewicz) When taking into account the evolving landscape that is the modern art world, the romantic notion of an artist’s life may no longer be valid. Ever since Duchamps created his first readymade, the definition of “What is art?” seems to be evolving with no defining criteria in sight. Animals are creating ‘art’, AI is creating ‘art’ and there are so many versions of modern art that no one unifying property exists. “A rebellious and destructive vigor has challenged every orthodoxy and destroyed every limitation of the definition of art.” (Fox, 20)

Perhaps the question of “What is art?” is not one to answer but to challenge.

How an artist chooses to engage with the viewer and to whom they will initially show the work to is a personal decision and possibly the only one an artist can make when releasing work publicly. In a world of mass media, the existence of an artistic persona cannot be ignored. “One of the key features of the mass media is the creation of a public image.” (Staniszewski, 247)

Artists have long been seen as larger than life celebrities. Picasso and Braque were working on cubism simultaneously but it was Picasso’s ability to garner attention that separated him from his counterpart. Rivers, just like Picasso, was able to create a persona that demanded attention. “…if the dynamics of “hipsterism” were instrumental in forging the young Rivers’ artistic identifications with black music and culture, then a similar set of dynamics informed his foray into the art world – the difference being that this time the object of hip fascination was not “blackness” but “homosexuality.” (Butt, 11) Rivers was without a doubt an exceptional artist, but did his need for attention distract from the genius of his work? This demand for a public persona seems to be transpiring at an accelerating pace. “The rapid domestication of the outrageous is the most characteristic feature of our artistic life, and the time lapse between shock received and thanks returned gets progressively shorter.” (Steinberg, 5) It is difficult enough for an artist to stay current but with the existence of social media and the evolutionary pace of cultures, is being “current” even possible? “...the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual chance that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.” (Jameson, 125) It’s very easy to see how an artist may become overwhelmed in their attempt to remain current.

Should an artist be fortunate enough to receive critical review, the success and trajectory of their career may hang on the opinion of one individual. Artists and critics seem to possess a contentious relationship that has most likely existed since the first early human cave drawings.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is highly unlikely that placing paint on walls was seen as a productive use of one’s time. Taken in a more contemporary context, it is clear the history of art has been corrupted by the white male dominated voice that has controlled its timeline. “Decolonizing art history is an ongoing project; there is no point in the future where we will be able to say, ‘At last it is complete; we have decolonized art history.’” (Grant, 40) “Those who have privileges inevitably hold on to them, and hold tight, no matter how marginal the advantage involved, until compelled to bow to superior power of one sort or another.” (Nochlin, 152) Although great strides are being made to decolonize art history and the current world of art, there will always be prejudgments when a work is viewed. “Post structuralist and reception theories have shown that all publicly circulated images acquire meanings beyond their makers’ intent and control” (Chave, 598) This would mean that in the end it is up to the artist to create something ethically justifiable by their hand and mind.

“Museums ask the viewer to forget that way of understanding and focus on just an aspect of the object, in denial of all other.” (Wilson, 215) A museum may be seen by many to be the pinnacle of an artist’s career, so what is an artist to say when a museum curator knowingly alters the meaning of a work? “Meanings, like memories, don’t go away. They can be suppressed, they remain within, waiting for someone to reveal them.” (Wilson, 215) The intended meaning of the work will always be there however, the powers that be have the option of making the artist’s intent known or creating an entire new meaning within their own visual conversation.

What does this all mean for the contemporary artist? Should they create artwork for themselves, for the general public, for the academia or simply for the promise of financial reward? There exist countless historians, critics, and other professionals in the arts who will, with complete disregard, instruct artists on what is or is not art and what is good art. Critical theory 1 has taught me the fundamental lesson of letting go of artwork once it enters the public sector. Separation for one’s work is an essential part of the growing and educational process of any artist. (Thank you, Stuart.)

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1. For arguments sake, cave drawings are being called “art” for this discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)