

Classical Art, Modern Art, and Fixated Introspection
Joshua Haas, 2016/05/31

In my opinion there needs to be a distinction between “art” viewed as “technique” and “art” viewed as “provocative.” Please note that I am not well-versed in art history, and the names I am going to use are blanket terms of convenience. The widely-held concept of art, what I will refer to as “classical” art, i.e. I spend 20 hours producing a beautiful landscape on a canvas, is a time investment and the artist likely wants compensation. On the other hand, what I’m going to term “provocative” art, which includes much of what is commonly called “modern art,” is concerned with provoking a dialogue: generally making people question assumptions that are normally taken for granted (including the definition and limits of “art” itself). Obviously these two categories are not mutually exclusive. **Yet there is a further distinction to be made, in that some things called “modern art” do not require an artistic vision or authorial intent.**

I think one reason some people take issue with “modern art” as not being “real art” (specifically with the intent to dismiss it as silly or irrelevant) is because they’re only placing value on skill or time needed for production. Traditionally, most art contained some level of impressive skill that a casual viewer did not possess. Sometimes art would also have some form of social or philosophical commentary. But, in the end, in purchasing a piece you are still paying the artist for their time. Conversely, modern art tends to be viewed as (in some cases fairly) producible by anyone. And therein lies the first disconnect.

Opponents of what *they* would term “modern art” see a creation that “my 8-year-old son could have made” and feel somehow cheated that they did not create the piece first, or at least find it inconceivable that someone would pay so much money for such a mundane or easily-replicated product. But I view this reaction as essentially a strawman of the intent and rationale of proponents, who look at a work of “modern art” and try to interpret meaning. In most cases I believe the artist’s intent is very significant, or at least the existence of intent at all. **When someone appreciates a piece of “modern art,” many times they are thanking the artist not for their skill or time spent creating the piece, but solely for the reaction the piece invoked.**

Much of the general public views beauty and physical skill of the artist as requirements for “classical art,” but the artist does not matter at all in certain things still termed “modern art.” Certainly there are pieces of modern art driven by an artistic vision and attempting to draw a specific reaction from the viewer. Yet the term “modern art” is also used more freely. To many people, I believe whether the artist is intentionally scamming the audience without any actual artistic vision is immaterial to whether the audience finds the piece meaningful or enjoyable.

At its core I view some modern art as philosophy rather than what is commonly viewed as “art” in our society. This does, however, come with the stipulation that meaning can be found anywhere. And here is the second, and likely more important, disconnect, leading to the more interesting reason people dismiss “modern art.” We should really divide the term “modern art” into two categories. The first can keep the name “modern art,” in that mental provocations and experimentation are valued over classical skill. This still requires the artist to have some “vision” or “intent.” If the vision of the artist is completely immaterial, then the reaction to the object is solely within each individual member of the audience.

What some people subscribing to the “any interpretation” idea probably don’t want to admit and I think many denouncing “modern art” have been unable to articulate effectively is that literally any external stimulus can provoke an interesting dialogue. If you care nothing for the original intent of the artist or even its existence (that’s a pretty big if though), then any random object in your daily life is a valid target. **The only difference is that when such a person views something labeled as “art,” they consciously adjust their viewpoint and make a concerted effort to explore esoteric and interesting explanations concerning the piece.**

And I think that is the greatest illusion of “modern art” for some people. This second category of “modern art” is then not a classification for objects but for the mindset of the people viewing those objects. I would tentatively label this the “fixated introspection” mindset (gotta sound cool, right?), where the viewer seeks further meaning from the starting point of a specific object. I find that fixated introspection being a mindset and not an actual category of art, but still being included by some in the label “modern art” has led to the generally dismissive and incredulous view of the term “modern art” by the general public. Once the intent of the artist is explained, I expect most people to understand why value is placed on that piece. But when no intent is present, and the fixated introspection mindset has led someone to label an object as “modern art,” the disconnect is irreconcilable.

What I have referred to in broad strokes (haha) as “classical art” must demonstrate technical prowess in its creation and is the easiest and probably most pervasive definition of the term “art.” Many such pieces also fall under the “provocative” umbrella, but that is not a requirement. The second category, true “modern art,” is valued most highly for the social commentary it provides or its provocative nature. It may also be technically impressive, but that is not a requirement. The final category is where many people take issue, and is not “art” at all. Rather, it is a process that some people value, whereby they search for some object that is viewed as worthy of their attention and then try to interpret deeper meaning. This “fixated introspection” is commonly confused with art, but exists solely within the mind of the viewer, and any connections made or scenarios explored as a result are coincidental to the actual object being observed. **Whether any of this actually matters is left as an exercise for the reader.**