

## What is Art?

*(Is it possible to define art?)*

Something funny happened with the second article I wrote for Munting Nayon (Issue 165). As I read the printed version I couldn't help but die laughing when I came across the line "*Painting is the art of the next paragraph.*" I didn't remember having invented a new definition for painting. It turned out to be a typographical error, a typical lay-outing mistake one is bound to commit when working with textboxes and other electronic editing tools. The probability of such accidents occurring increases when jet lag is thrown into the mix -- Tito Eddie just flew back from Manila then. I called his attention but told him not to worry and to do nothing about it since the cropped idea was repeated several times in the article anyway. But, so nice of him, an erratum came out in the next issue just the same.

Something even funnier happened afterwards. I caught myself entertaining the thought that maybe, just maybe, this definition, product of two happily-overlapped textboxes, could have truth or value of some sort. Couldn't there be a way for painting to be an art of the next paragraph? After allowing the question to linger at the back of my mind for some time, as I always do when trying to square some complicated ideas, the answer emerged as if by inspiration. Of course, there is! Isn't painting popularly defined as expression of ideas and emotions by the creation of aesthetic qualities using two-dimensional visual language? Now, aren't ideas and emotions expressed by external sensible signs like words, sentences and paragraphs? What better way to know the inner thoughts and feelings of an artist than in a paragraph? The modifier "next" could easily signify the dynamism of painting as an art form in constant change and progress. So, who said painting can't be an art of the next paragraph? On the contrary, the definition makes perfect sense. Only one condition is needed for this definition to be true: that the next paragraph really exists. I have just discovered an original and revolutionary formulation of the meaning of painting! Didn't they say that *in painting there are no mistakes, only happy accidents?*

If I were a true-blooded artist, meaning someone obsessed in making sure he is considered an artist, I would have immediately run to the highways and byways, dripping wet and all, shouting *Eureka* till my lungs burst. And such behavior would not have been strange by any standard. At least, it would have paled in comparison to that of Vincent van Gogh whose art is interesting only if viewed against the backdrop of him cutting his ear or committing suicide, or to that of Salvador Dali who gained tremendous attention by walking his pig in the streets of Barcelona. Justifying my definition would have been easy if not unnecessary. If one examines it slowly, it is perfectly at home with the other art theories and philosophies in fashion today.

How is art understood in the contemporary world?

*Art is anything that you want it to be.* This statement of an artist in a recent TV interview basically summarizes the modern view of art. Art has no permanent meaning. Its meaning is determined solely by the artist. It does not have to be a beautiful object, the result of the application of skill or talent on particular materials. Art could be anything like ordinary objects which the artist considers as art. Any explanation of art an artist concocts is always valid because somehow it has become connatural to art to be perceived and defined according to the preference of the definer. It is like clay that can be shaped and formed in countless ways.



### Apollo and Daphne

*(Oil on Canvas, 60 cm x 50 cm)*

*Cupid has two types of arrows: golden and lead. Anyone struck by a golden arrow is moved to love while anyone hit by a lead arrow flees from love. The myth goes that the god Apollo was pierced by a golden arrow and Daphne, a nymph born from a river, by a lead arrow. One can imagine the chase that followed, Daphne fleeing from the amorous pursuit of Apollo. When she got weary, she cried for help and as she did so her chest became enclosed in thin bark, her hair turned into leaves, her arms into branches and her feet became rooted in the ground. Daphne had metamorphosed into a laurel tree, yet still Apollo loved her. This sculpture in the Borghese Gallery in Rome is Bernini's interpretation of the story. I found this a fitting subject for an exercise in the use of limited palette.*

Randomly splash some pigment on a canvas, hurl some garbage in the air, rap out some lines in an ear-splitting monotonous voice, then call the results as art and art they become! Art is a universal label that can be affixed to any finished product in the absence of better sounding or more creative brand names!

Of course, originally, art used to have a precise meaning. The whole trouble began when a few individuals lacking artistic skills insisted that the meaning of art should be expanded in order to accommodate other types of work – their mediocre works, that is. According to them, the great masters of the past with all their splendid creations have already done everything that there is to be done in art. There is no way to surpass them anymore. Neither is there a point in repeating their works since art should not be static. Art should be progressive. Therefore, new uses for art should be discovered and its meaning should be broadened to include items previously considered non-art. Art should have no boundaries.

most meaningless form: *everything is art*. And why not? Once the concession is made that the boundaries of art should be expanded and the artist is given the omnipotence to proclaim anything he chooses as art, what is there to prevent him from labeling everything as art? Nothing! Everything, as in absolutely everything, can be converted into an artwork, as shown by the following stories.

The British art community recently awarded a major prize of 20,000 pounds to an artwork entitled “Lights Going On and Off”. It consisted of an empty room with lights going on and off. Just what is so special about lights going on and off that they should deserve such a huge amount of money? Don’t we all see them in the streets when cars change lanes or directions? Well, Martin Creed, the winning artist seemed to be the first to declare lights going on and off as art. It’s original!



**Carol’s First Painting**  
(Oil on Canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm)

*My wife, Carol, consented to have a painting class only after I promised to prepare salmon sashimi and tempura for dinner. This painting materialized slowly before her eyes as she watched, studied and imitated every movement of mine. She signed her name in big letters and made me frame it immediately. To preserve the rarity of her artwork, she vowed never to have further painting lessons anymore, at least, not from me. But I was happy enough to prove that the rudiments of painting can be taught to any non-art person in a couple of hours. Now, I can’t wait to carry out the same experiment with Josemarie.*

In an American school, an art student got a low grade for submitting a realistic painting. The teacher said that although the work was done with a lot of talent and technical expertise, it was lacking in idea and inspiration. The highest mark went to a project that consisted of a goldfish preserved in resin but with the eyes scooped out and glued to its tail.

The Manchester Guardian reported just recently how a garbage collector in Frankfurt, Germany found himself in great trouble for carrying out his duty. As he was driving through the city in the rain, he noticed a pile of yellow plastic sheets which he thought were building materials dumped on the street by construction workers for the sanitation department to pick up. He promptly shoveled them up, crushed and brought them to the rubbish depot. He only realized later through a local paper that the yellow sheets were actually part of a city-wide exhibition of modern sculpture by a graduate of Frankfurt’s Städel art school. Every effort of his to recover the sheets was in vain since the depot workers had already thrown them into the incinerator. He apologized and said in his defense that he didn’t recognize it as art and there was nothing to show it was art. As a consequence, thirty Frankfurt garbage collectors were sent to modern art classes to try to ensure that the same mistake never happens again. In the monthly “Check Your Art Sense” lessons, the dustmen were shown two pictures: one from the museum’s permanent exhibition and another lesser-known work from the archive. Then they were asked to discuss the differences between them.

This manner of thinking set off a long period of experimentations, all with the purpose of finding new forms and functions of art – new ways of painting, sculpture, music, etc. It is not hard to see how this free spirit could only lead to artistic relativism and subjectivism. If the original criteria for art are discarded, who is going to decide whether something is art or not? Who else if not the individual artist! The artist becomes the sole arbiter of what is or what is not art. All he has to do is say the word and art it is going to be!

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp, a Dada artist, was asked to contribute to a public exhibition in New York City. He submitted a porcelain urinal obtained from a hardware store and entitled it *Fountain*. This act was later seen to have sparked an intellectual revolution that continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He implied that art should be anything the artist deems art. Thus, get hold of a urinal, label it art, exhibit it in a publicly accepted venue like a public toilet, let people appreciate and even try it, and no authority on earth should question its artistic value. Art is a master piss!

Unfortunately, this purely relativistic attitude towards art does not end here. Ultimately, it leads to its most radical but also

If urinals and other toilet fixtures have the potential to be art,

couldn't the same be said of the liquid and solid materials processed in them? That, you might say, would already be an abuse. But an Italian artist would disagree. Recently, the London Telegraph, reported that The Tate Museum, a prestigious British museum, "paid 22,300 pounds of public money for a work that is, quite literally, a load of excrement." The artwork consisted of a tin can containing approximately one ounce of an artist's digestive residues which we will just call his *expressions*. Before he died in 1963, Piero Manzoni, filled up 90 cans with his own personal golden *expressions*, sealed them according to industrial standards and then circulated them to museums around the world. According to the Telegraph, aside from the Tate, the Museum of Modern Art

to a halt when it bumps into its exact opposite. Now, nothing is ever defined by equating it with its opposite or contradiction. Common sense tells us that this is against the most fundamental principle of reality and logic: it is impossible for a thing to be and not be at the same time in the same respect. Art cannot be non-art at the same time and in the same sense. But, for them, *everything is possible, even the impossible*. With this obstinate pronouncement, the abolition of the meaning of art is complete.

Unfortunately, it is within the context of this nihilistic art situation that we ask ourselves "What is art?" I think we all know that the answer to this question can only be in the form of another



**Teaching Aid**

*(Oil on Canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm)*

*This is the teaching aid I used for Carol. The lesson consisted in me painting this still life while she was doing the same on a separate canvas with the same drawing. She imitated every movement of mine from mixing paints on the palette in the right proportion to applying them correctly on the right spot in the canvas. The results were two almost identical paintings. Of course, several days afterwards, not wanting to discard my copy, I decided to elevate it to the level of a serious painting by giving it a second coating and adding another lemon for balance and some cherries for unity, among others.*

question: "What is the point?" What is the point in trying to find out the meaning of a word that has been rendered meaningless by the destructive revolution of a few pioneering individuals? Ironically, one of the most frequently asked questions of these 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes is "What is art?"

That is why, for as long as I could, I refrained from using the word "art" in our previous analyses. It would have been a very handy concept for explaining the different aspects of painting. But then it would have been the surest and most direct path towards confusion. Now, however, we have reached the point where we have no choice but to confront this topic head on.

To define a word which has been badly mangled and distorted all through out history is not an easy task. It is not enough to give the definition one thinks is right. One is also obliged to show the error and inaccuracies of the others. Since the so-called avant-gardes were so prolific in inventing new meanings, we certainly are going to have our hands full in the near future. But we will start by studying what we judge to be the original meaning of art, the one that is in keeping with its real nature. Then we will proceed to show why the others are opposed to its true essence.

Meanwhile, let us go back to my novel and innovative definition of painting. I think its boundaries needs to be stretched a little

in New York and the Pompidou Museum in Paris also paid actual money for cans of Piero Manzoni's arts. People now fall in line and pay about 20 dollars for a chance to view the artwork and to experience the same emotions the artist felt as he created his master feces.

All these anecdotes show that the modernist position – *everything is art* -- can only lead to absurdity and contradiction. Hence, it seems reasonable to expect that the definition should be abandoned and the original order restored. But, on the contrary, Paradoxism, a new art movement which proclaims itself the replacement of post-postmodernism, boldly declares that contradictions and paradoxes themselves constitute the very essence of art. Its main thesis is "art is non-art." This is all too understandable. Any expansionist movement can only be brought

bit: "Painting is the art of the next paragraph even if there is no next paragraph." This should sound contradictory enough! Now, I should be ready to promulgate it to the whole world. But, no, I am not about to climb the mountain tops and do that because I am still in full control of my senses and, above all, I am not a true-blooded artist. Art used to denote works of superb quality and refinement and being an artist was once a respectable profession. Now, it has become a weird activity associated primarily with lunacy, lack of hygiene, mediocrity and utter nonsense.

What is art? I know the answer as long as you don't ask me.

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