

Why You Hate Art - You know you do (2006)

Americans, the vast majority, are not merely indifferent to art; they have an antipathy to it for various reasons. This essay will attempt to chronicle nine of those reasons:

I

Dada, which evolved into post-modernism, has been described as anti-art, and quite aptly. All movements in the past have challenged conventions, but Dada and its post-modern progeny have challenged what have been the defining characteristics of art for tens of thousands of years: originality, agency, artifact, selectivity, craftsmanship, and beauty. Regardless of who submitted the famous urinal, it was not only not made by that person, it was a mass-produced item. Even the anonymous artists of the past exhibited agency and craftsmanship. Admittedly, it is difficult to kill all the birds with one stone. "Fountain" can still be seen as beautiful, even more beautiful than a gargoyle. Andy Warhol's five hour and twenty minute film, "Sleep," a single shot which showed his friend sleeping, took aim at the notion of selectivity. He himself defined it as an "anti-film." Robert Rauschenberg's smudged, blank sheet of paper entitled "Drawing," which he attested was an erasure of a drawing by Willem de Kooning, is considered a landmark in post-modern art. It attacked the notions of originality, artifact, beauty, agency, craftsmanship, and selectivity, effectively killing all the birds with one stone.

Before discussing the other reasons why many Americans are not merely indifferent to contemporary art, but have an antipathy to it, I would submit that reason number one is that they feel they are either being preached to or lied to or made fun of. The other nine reasons puts the shoe on the other foot.

II

Culture is an agglomeration. Although only the top layer is most visible, ideas, even abandoned ones, are built one on top of another. To begin at the beginning, the Puritan fathers distrusted not only art, but also all adornment. "Charm is deceptive and beauty is vain," as Proverbs 31:30 has it. Even the singing of hymns was banned. They did not allow instruments in their churches, rather, music was restricted the

singing of Psalms in unison. The organ and the singing of hymns did not enter the Protestant churches in America until the 19th century. This fear of idolatry can be found in other pietistic religious sects, even to this day.

Paradoxically, even as some worldly attractions were shunned, and pleasure itself mistrusted, the idea of material prosperity as a sign of God's favor is part of this same Puritan heritage. The Puritans were Calvinists, who, in the dichotomy of predestination vs. choice, strongly favored a theology of predestination. To them, material prosperity was a sign of God's blessing. As Jonathan Edwards, the evangelist whose preaching helped inaugurate the revival known as the Great Awakening, wrote in his book *Charity and Its Fruits* (1738), "But if you place your happiness in God, in glorifying Him and in serving Him by doing good, in this way above all others you will promote your wealth and honor and pleasure here below, and obtain hereafter a crown of . . . glory and pleasure forevermore at God's right hand." Prosperity could be both a sign of Divine favor and a channel of blessing, but not a conduit for the ostentatious display of wealth and power such as characterized the estates, the castles and the churches of Europe. The purchase or commissioning of art would have seemed immodest if not idolatrous to the Puritan mind.

III

From the middle of the nineteenth century, a new philosophy conquered America, again from England. This was called "Utilitarianism." It was first promulgated by Jeremy Bentham. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a Utilitarian as "one who considers utility the standard of whatever is good for man." Utility then, according to Bentham, is the property in a thing "whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness (all this in the present case comes to the same thing)." He later added the words "profit, convenience, and emolument" (remuneration).

The problem is that words, such as "pleasure," may mean something completely different to different people at different times. Bentham was a Materialist who regarded anything which could not be measured as illusory. Thus he repudiated any kind of spiritual pleasure such as that afforded by art or music. Nothing was inherently a source of pleasure, and therefore good; it was only so in that it provided some profit or convenience or opportunity for such. As his successor, William Stanley

Jevons, so succinctly put it, "Value depends entirely on utility." It was the perfect philosophy for the Industrial Revolution. "Yankee practicality" is still admired, which is why so many who have been materially prospered would think nothing of spending lavishly on their home or purchasing a boat or a snowmobile, or even a second snowmobile. It is perceived as practical, ingenious, utilitarian, whereas a work of art is not.

The 2002 Nobel Prize for economics was shared by an Israeli psychologist, Daniel Kahneman. His startling breakthrough: Money can't buy happiness. Finally, a scientific negation of Utilitarianism. In other words, with all the quantification of goods and services, the question remains, what is the amount of happiness that it brings? The conclusion: once subsistence is achieved and the basic necessities are covered, no amount of money will make you happier. Some experiments also reveal an anomaly in human nature. The vast majority of people do not make decisions based on a clear assessment of risk versus reward (pleasure vs. pain). They are far more risk averse, much more afraid of losing what they have than desirous of gaining more. And why shouldn't they be, when we now know that once a certain threshold is passed, that no amount more will increase happiness. Yet many of the most successful have taken more risk and have courted and encountered failure. The Constitution does not vouchsafe happiness for us, only the right to pursue it. I might add that it is the minority, the risk takers who purchase and invest in art. Later we will see how anti-elitism and resentment in the face of the astronomical increase in value of these assets has added to the public's distrust of high end art.

IV

It is my theory that a nation's capacity for art appreciation is closely tied to its capacity for meditation. It is not even necessary that the majority practice a form of meditation, just that there is an element of society which does, and that this meditative group is seen as part of the fabric of society. This is certainly the case in Asian cultures, such as Japan with its practitioners of Zen Buddhism. The tea ceremony is the cultivated practice of appreciating the tea, the teacup, the tea-house, and the ceremony itself in all of their aspects.

China had its tradition of court officials retiring or going into exile in seclusion to practice painting, poetry, and calligraphy. In France,

what I might call the Gross Domestic Product of Meditation is spread more evenly among the public. Each region, for example, produces its own distinctive wine or cheese based on its own particular climate and soil. The subtle character of such a wine or such a cheese requires sufficient time not only to produce it, but also to enjoy it. As time is allocated for a long, leisurely meal, taste becomes refined, and this refinement is transmitted through the culture. Taste itself becomes meditation.

Throughout Europe, playwrights such as Vaslav Havel and writers such as Andre Malraux have shuttled from the arts and letters to government and back and not merely to write their memoirs. Plato's idea of the philosopher king is still alive. I believe that this connection between the gross national output of meditation and the net appreciation of art has to do with the perception and definition of time, which is culturally based. The culture which values time more than possessions will take the time to fall in love with a work of art, and not a mere infatuation.

European and Asian appreciation of their own cultural artifacts is widespread in their societies. For example, on a popular game show for many years in Iran, two opponents face off and recite couplets from classical Persian poetry. Each couplet must begin with the last letter of the previously recited couplet. Even first graders compete. We have made a virtue out of busyness. A whole new genre of television drama, taking place in the hospital, or law office, or the White House, ennobles characters who only have time to carry on a dialogue on the run, in the corridor, and who have no time for any meaningful personal relationship outside of their work. Cut to the commercial which shows a soccer mom in the driver's seat, hastily accepting a microwaved, pre-packaged cup of soup handed to her like a baton in a relay race through the window of her car.

There was one exception, one movement that arose as a reaction against Utilitarianism. Emerson, one of the leading lights of the Transcendental Movement, wrote that Utilitarianism was a "stinking philosophy." He, along with Thoreau and Emily Dickinson constituted a small group "marching to a different drummer," as Thoreau put it. Transcendentalism represented a backlash in the country which gave rise to some of our great poetry, essays, and art. The Hudson River School of painting engendered the whole idea of American landscape and gave rise to our National Park system.