

The Intersection of Art and Politics

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“When a man is born...there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.” James Joyce, *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*

“The best art is political, and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.” Toni Morrison

Introduction

The quotes from Joyce and Morrison above suggest differing perspectives on the intersection of art and politics, and they represent the jumping off point for a long-running conversation around a pointed question: Is art inherently political, or does it exist in and of itself, transcending political intention or interpretation? To set the parameters of this topic, we readily acknowledge that some art is intended to be political. For example, Delacroix’s painting, [*Liberty Leading the People*](#) is overtly political...Delacroix even paints himself into the center of the 1848 Revolution tableau. Similarly, it would be naïve not to see that when the Renaissance Church commissioned religious art there was a political purpose. We also understand that museum curators or audiences may impose political meaning. However, we are asking a deeper question, namely whether art by its very nature is political or whether it stands apart from intention or interpretation.

Addressing this question requires definitions of both art and politics. We begin by stipulating a definition of politics, a quite straightforward task, before turning to the more challenging work of defining art. While artists express themselves in poetry, prose, music, or photography, theatre, dance, architecture, and more, for the purposes of this discussion we will focus our attention specifically on visual, tactile art. Specifically we invite you to consider works and thoughts on art of three people (see works below): **Thornton Dial**, an African American who arranged everyday objects he found in rural Alabama into modernistic expressions as in his installation, *Lonnie Holley’s Vision Land*; **Marcel Duchamp**, a classically trained French artist whose influential work, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, you probably know; and **Pablo Picasso** whose immense painting *Guernica* is also well-known.

What is Politics?

We are intentionally adopting a high-level definition of politics. We do not define politics as partisan struggle, though that may contribute to politics. Nor do we mean the pursuit of interest or power for its own sake, though they too may be part of the spectacle of politics. Politics may entail the use of force, or sophistry, or deception. It may unfold in a democracy, a dictatorship, in a nation-state, or in a smaller entity, even a family or group.

In all cases, though, politics reflects Aristotle's perspective on community formation. As he observed, "Since we see that every city-state (polis) is a community and that every community is established for the sake of some good, and that the community which has the most authority of all...aims the highest...the polity exists for the sake of the good life." When Aristotle speaks of "some good" he means a social value such as security or happiness and over time many other values, some in tension with one another such as freedom and equality have been recognized as important. Politics, then, is the activity of prioritizing competing values and building institutions to achieve those priorities. To put this more succinctly, politics means, "The collective enterprise of authoritatively allocating values in a society."

What is Art?

Unlike politics, a definition of art is very difficult to specify, a fact that gives credence to the view that art has an ineffable character. This NPR video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2VpNx5ZxSA>) suggests the contested and perhaps inexpressible (in words) quality of artistic expression.

Susanne K. Langer, a 20th century philosopher wrote *Artistic expression is...the verbally ineffable, yet not inexpressible law of vital experience, the pattern of affective and sentient being. This is the "content" of what we perceive as "beautiful form"; and this formal element is the artist's "idea" which is conveyed by every great work. It is this which so-called "abstract art" seeks to abstract by defying the model or dispensing with it altogether; and which music above all arts can reveal, unobscured by adventitious literal meanings.*

Please take a look at the following piece by American folk artist Thornton Dial:
Lonnie Holley's Vision Land

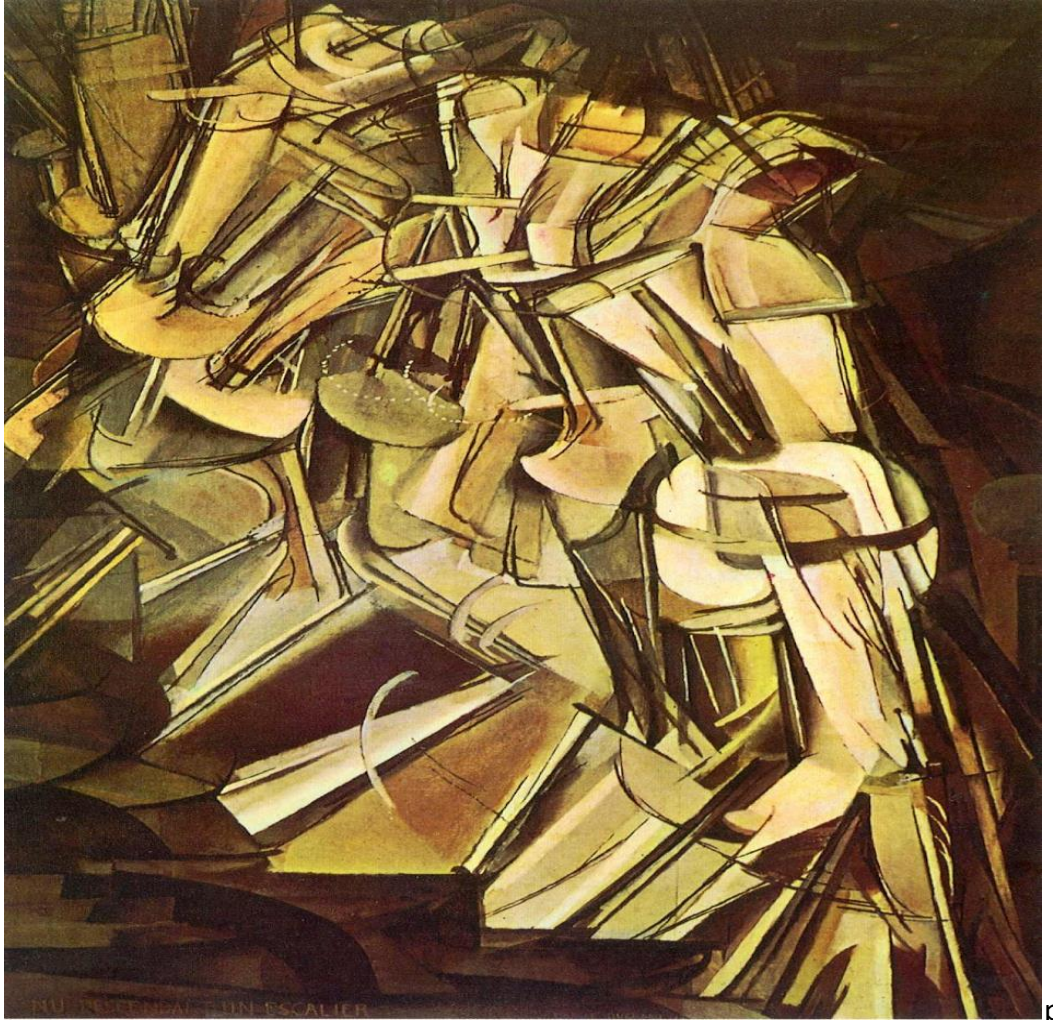


Dial said of his artistic process, *it's about likes and dislikes...*

We can relate to people's spirit and we can relate to their mind. I understand those things, and I believe we need to make the mind close to the spirit...

My art is the evidence of my freedom. When I start any piece of art, I can pick up anything I want to pick up. When I get ready for that, I already got my idea for it. I start with whatever fits with my idea, things I will find anywhere. I gather up things from around. I see the piece in my mind before I start, but after you start making it you see more that needs to go in it. It's just like inventing something. It's like patterns that you cut out to show you how to make something- a boxcar, or clothes. Everything has a pattern for it. The pattern for a piece of art is in your mind; it's the idea for it. That's the pattern.

Second, here is a piece by the 20th century French painter Marcel Duchamp:



“Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2” shown first in 1912.

Duchamp said of art, *What art is, in reality, is this missing link, not the links which exist. It's not what you see that is art; art is the gap.*

And of this piece, he said, ... *the idea of describing the movement of a nude coming downstairs while still retaining static visual means to do this, particularly interested me. The fact that I had seen chronophotographs of fencers in action and horse galloping (what we today call stroboscopic photography) gave me the idea for the Nude. It doesn't mean that I copied these photographs. The Futurists were also interested in somewhat the same idea, though I was never a Futurist. And of course, the motion picture with its cinematic techniques was developing then too. The whole idea of movement, of speed, was in the air... My aim was a static representation of movement, a static composition of indications of various positions taken by a form in movement—with no attempt to give cinema effects through painting. The reduction of a head in movement to a bare line seemed to me defensible.*

Finally, here is a picture of Picasso's famous “Guernica.” Keep in mind that the painting is more than 12 feet high (137.4 inches) and more than 25 feet across (305.5 inches).

349.3 cm × 776.6 cm (137.4 in × 305.5 in)



Picasso said of this painting, *...this bull is a bull, and this horse is a horse... If you give a meaning to certain things in my paintings it may be very true, but it is not my idea to give this meaning. What ideas and conclusions you have got I obtained too, but instinctively, unconsciously. I make the painting for the painting. I paint the objects for what they are.*

Your Thoughts

Please prepare a response (200-400 words) to our paper and submit it to lewesseminar@gmail.com by Monday, January 8th. Here are some writing prompts you might want to consider:

1. We used the definition of politics as “The collective enterprise of authoritatively allocating values in a society.” Is there an inherent nexus between art and politics? If so, in what sense is art political?
2. The term “society,” in this definition/context, is being applied to the general polity. But does it also apply to the society of artists? If so, can it be said that developments and inventions in creative technique are “political” in their own right, within a society specific to artists?
3. When artistic expressive technique is used to promote a specific societal agenda, is the resulting piece primarily a work of art or is it specifically a work of political propaganda? Or is it both? Can a work of propaganda ever be considered to be a work of art?
4. Is the concept of art itself, as discussed by the various artists and thinkers above, transcendent to the individual or is it beholden to the individual artist? Is art truly in the eye of the beholder, or is it something more? Does your answer to this affect your opinion regarding prompt #1 above?