

Historic View – What is ART

There have been many attempts to define art, starting with the ancient Greeks more than 2000 years ago. Plato considered our world a mere shadow of an underlying reality of which we can perceive very limited information. (Startlingly like how we imagine Quantum Field theory). Aristotle on the other hand saw art as a re-presentation of reality---an analog of the external world as it is represented inside our brain. In the world of the ancient Greeks, the word 'teche' meant all artistry, including what we would now call the production of consumer goods. (i.e., produced by an artisan or by an artisan-controlled mechanism). We can make this concept even more inclusive by admitting *all* objects produced by *all* living organisms. Thus, for example a robin's nest becomes a work of art, or even better, a Bower bird's fantastic creation becomes fine art (from a bird's eye perspective!). Present day usage of the word 'art' has so narrowed in meaning that we now exclude the production of utensils and devices used in everyday life. A person engaged in the manufacture of such items is at best an artisan or at worst a robot. ('Manu- Facture' refers to something 'Hand-Made' but a tool, a machine, or a robot, is of course just an extension of a hand). A person making 'tech' objects, is now called a technician and not an artist. (Literally translated 'technician' should refer to a person dealing with all objects, including 'art' objects). Our concept of 'High' art has strayed from the more inclusive original ideas of what constituted art, and so has what to call a person who makes such works of art. Of course, even in our Western cultural viewpoint, the use of 'art' to specifically designate the Fine Arts is a very recent phenomenon. The

Platonic, (axial worldview), assumed our perception of something as concrete, something 'real', even though the underlying 'real' reality was in some shadowy, ideal form, hidden from us. (Nebulous fields of quantum probabilities??)

The later axial worldview, (a lifepath from ignorance to wisdom and from this world to another), assumes a Hegelian viewpoint. One in which we are always becoming, relative to our past histories until we reach some ultimate awareness. Presently these ideas are found in Process Philosophy, where there is no 'Present', but a furiously changing Universe that is in a constant state of 'Becoming'. Finally, Postmodernism denies any rational way that our sensory perceptions could explain the meaning of life. In the 21st century, it is looking more and more hopeless to ever find any concrete absolutes. The expansion of 'knowledge' has in fact uncovered our truly abysmal ignorance. What remain of the Platonic ideal world are the shadowy forms, the possibility of ephemeral quantum fields.

If we seek the beginning of representational art, we could study images painted on the walls of prehistoric caves 40,000+ years ago.

Likely pre-humans were creating objects over a million years ago but only a few cave-protected artefacts have survived. These cannot explain 'why art?' A modern artist would most likely ask *how* it was done, and the answer is – with great difficulty. Just imagine no pre-stretched canvas, no pigments, no light inside a pitch-black cave!

Our human mind is an electro-chemical abstraction, a very simplified analog of only a few limited aspects of "a perceptual physical reality". It is this same human mind-brain abstraction of 'reality' that became our 'consciousness' many millions of years ago. Perhaps we must search

further back in our pre-history for better enlightenment regarding the emergence of what to us only appears to be reality, but in fact is our awareness of a simplified modeling of reality within our own head. The search back in time must not only include our early ancestors but also the species that preceded them. What we euphemistically call our mid-brain is in fact a replica of the ancient reptilian brain and it is the structure that controls our emotions, basic biases, and initiates our behaviors. The neo-cortex that separates us from Tyrannosaurus Rex, acts more as a moderator, and allows us the luxury of increased dispositions and finesses in emotion (other than 'fight or flee' and 'attract or repel'). It makes us 'human', but it still does not explain the why of 'art'. Going back even further we can ask what distinguishes 'life' from any other organic molecule. Basically, a living cell separates itself from its environment via a cell wall. Considering multicellular life, we find a surrounding barrier—a skin. Skipping ahead to reptiles we observe nest building. At the level of mammals, we observe the use of shelters (caves, burrows etc.) For us humans our egg-shell primitive impulses result in shells for enhancing our skin (underwear, hats, coats, pants, saris), shells for transport (cars, ships, planes, space stations), shells for residence (hut, house, castle, coffin), and societal shells (church, PTA, nation state, artists' society). In order to build these more sophisticated enclosures we have developed sophisticated tools. Art output may have arisen from this basic enclosure building process, and as tools became more sophisticated, art begins enhancing our shells and ultimately becomes a 'fine art'. This means that our relationships to art are fundamentally much deeper than some art critics in New York may think. Clearly, aesthetic choices are involved in the clothing

we wear, the cars we drive, the housing we live in, the social friendships that surround us, our choice of political environs and the philosophical memes that surround us.

We inherited tool **use** from our chimp ancestors, and we inherited tool **making** from Homo Erectus. Our common ancestor, of some six million years ago, must have had at least some symbolic ability. Chimpanzees can learn the significance of many sounds and learn sign language. (Artistry?). What we Homo Sapiens specialize in is the creation of complex symbolic artifacts, and manipulation of abstract symbols untethered to actual referent material. (i.e., Language). We also appreciate the passage of time – each unique artifact we create places a punctuation mark in our biographic history. Thus, a successful bison hunt can be depicted as a linear drawing on a cave wall. It might also have become a time talisman for future sexual success. (The ability to feed your mate!)

Ability to make drawings by Australian aborigines and African Bushmen indicates that this was present prior to at least 60,000 years ago. It could date as far back as the emergence of Homo Sapiens 130,000 years ago; and primitive tool making by Homo Erectus is probably 2 million years old.

Genetically we are less than 2% different from our cousins the chimpanzees. We differ by a small fraction of a percent from our Pleistocene ancestors. The basic emotions that drove them, still drive us today. Whatever dispositions were available to them then, are also ours. Of course, we have a greatly expanded use of symbols and a culturally handed down technical knowledge of how to make many more types of artifacts. As we move up the ladder of increasingly complex life-forms there

is a corresponding increase in levels of symbolic awareness that allows more sophisticated actions.

So, what has all this to do with defining art? Some critics may object--- a definition of art can be so broad that it fails to define anything. But that is exactly what is needed for a theory that encompasses everything we do. (TOE or the Theory of Everything.) It would embrace all dispositions physical and mental available to us. It would become the story of human artistry---all of it! It is the art of being human, of doing all that we as a species are physically and mentally capable of doing. Another objection may claim that the accounts of the evolutionary emergence of art are useless to describe its present complexity. Stephen Davies points out that ethologists believe art evolved as an adaptive behavior for breeding success, and beauty is defined by sexual attractiveness. (Too simplistic?). On the other hand, those who ignore the effects of vastly more than two million years of evolution on our present 10,000-year young civilization, are ignoring the obvious. Humans have hundreds of universal traits, a lot of which are probably inspired by our genetic biases. These traits emerge in the here and now, regardless if originally promoted in the Pleistocene. Professor McGilchrist points out that Western appreciation of Eastern art and vice versa would be impossible without the existence of non-socially made values that enable us to see 'beauty' and express it as an art form, regardless of culture.

Art critics who disregard the pertinent research on 'consciousness' (awareness) by neurophysiologists, and the conjectures on paleopsychology by anthropologists, will have difficulty coming to relevant conclusions regarding our modern perceptions of 'art'. Thus a Theory of

Everything in Art must include our evolutionary and historical heritage; an analyses of present-day human universals; the psychology that makes a 'self'; our innate perceptual biases; an understanding of conscious awareness; societal, institutional and cultural influences; factors influencing communication linkages; and above all, an honest admission of the animal (reptilian) nature of our mid-brain, that so often automatically drives our selection of dispositions.

A great advantage of TOE is that it can be applied to other living beings, thus, to be accurate the name of our theory should be "TOE Art - Homo Sapiens". Most other art theories cannot describe the 'art' of chimpanzees, or of our distant cousin Homo Erectus, or the Neanderthals, or for that matter aliens we may someday encounter. So, does this answer the question of 'why art?' Perhaps it only expands it to 'why are we here?' and to Plato's ultimate question of 'What is Here?' (What are we aware of?).

So, on a practical level, what should an artist be aware of? As we increase the level of our awareness by inventing telescopes, microscopes, and mathematical languages to describe a reality that is too complex for us to otherwise understand, we become more capable of incorporating new ideas into our art that are relevant to society in the present. For example, without electron microscopes and the knowledge of the DNA structure of viruses, an artist would not paint a picture of 'Nature Goddesses creating new Viruses'.

(Note 2)

