

Some existing Art theories

Institutional theory of Art

Let's examine some of the prevalent theories of art to see if they can be of any help.

First, there is Dickie's First Institutional Theory of Art. The basic idea here is that there is a need for some authorizing institution that can decree what is art and what is not.

We all know the story of the Emperor's new wardrobe.

In my mind's eye I can clearly visualize the Emperor standing erect in his open-top Mercedes-Benz, waving to the crowds who admire his new regal robes as the car slowly inches along the Broadway.

Little Ivan looks at the Emperor and screams "Look, Mom, the Emperor is naked!" Mom quickly replies: "Hush now!" yet little Ivan insists: "But Mom, he has no clothes". Mom quickly covers Ivan's mouth and hisses: "When the Institute of the Supreme Interior Ministry of Culture says the Emperor has clothes, believe it, or you will shortly be shivering in a much colder climate!"

So, is Dickie totally wrong? Of course not! The artistry of covering our bodies is one of the fundamental fashions of the human arts scene. If you think I am kidding, think not! The Emperor's new outfit also illustrates one of our most beautiful examples of an abstract mental construct: "Conceptual Art".

The revised Second version of his Institutional Theory of Art addresses the critics of his first edition, but in so doing becomes long-winded and circular. I found it disappointing - it has no emotional

impact, arouses no 'aaha! sense' of intellectual insight. It lacks beauty!

Professor Dickie's book 'Introduction to Aesthetics – An Analytic Approach' is a wonderfully clear account of the history of theories of beauty and theories of art from Plato to the 20th century. Unfortunately, he discounts aid from anthropologists and thus omits two million years of the formative periods of human artistry. The mind of Man embraces two kinds of memory – the genetic and the cultural. Who we really are underneath our ephemeral veneer of civilization is critically important since it illuminates our innate biases -- how we perceive ourselves and how we relate to our external environs. (Our own unique mental model of the VR Universe that each of us live in). On my wish list is a book co-authored by George Dickie and Ellen Disanayake.

Most modern theories of art address very narrow artistic activities by ignoring 2 million years of pre-history and leaving even less room for the radical surprises in our Quantum future. We could, possibly, agree to have a different definition for each of the art of painting, or the art of pottery, or the art of war, or the art of politics, pornographic arts, religious arts, mathematical artistry, medicinal arts, scientific artistry, etc. Each of these areas could have its own institutional overseer, but overall, Dickie's very elitist Institutional approach will leave many artists without a more all-encompassing explanation.

The Savannah Hypothesis

Since making art objects is a human, intentional activity, perhaps we can start by looking at our present concepts of who we humans are and where we came from. Pinker in his book 'The Blank Slate', lists ten cognitive faculties which evolved to allow our ancient ancestors to live in the Pleistocene savannah - the Serengeti grasslands in East Africa. (Note 1). Among these faculties he includes an intuitive feel for nature and especially living things. The nature of the African savanna several million years ago is known. The climate was dry and cool, which promoted recession of tropical jungle and the existence of open grassland with scattered clumps of trees. This was a well-lit landscape without the dense canopy that shaded the equatorial jungle. (Note 3)

We know these grasslands were inhabited by herbivores and thus contained an abundance of protein. (Reason enough for choosing it as a habitat). Unfortunately, the abundant supply of protein also sustained other meat-eating predators, such as sabre-tooth tigers. Hence the need for nearby trees and for things to hide behind, such as rocks, and the availability of rapid escape routes. The openness of grasslands as opposed to a jungle habitat, where enemies could wait in ambush, was a desirable, if dangerous feature. (Note 4)

Since meat was not always available, our ancestors also looked for other things in nature such as verdant vegetation indicating possible plant food. Dry seasons were not liked, and the arid deserts were usually avoided. Anthropologists have found skeletal remains of various hominids, but not specifically a sequence of remains which belongs to our own ancestors. Could it be that our ancestors were water-loving apes who lived along shorelines and dined off seafood? Traces left by them would have been obliterated by the rising ocean levels during warm periods. In any case, we have an intuitive need to

be near water. Landscapes look more appealing if there is an indication of water nearby.

Our distant ancestors, adapting to such an environment for many millions of years developed certain built-in likes and dislikes. We who have lived in our new urban environment only a few thousand years, still carry within us traces of ancient preferences from our Pleistocene ancestors. It should come as no surprise that we are born with fancies that harp back to conditions of our remote past. We are intimately tied to our biological selves, and our biological selves are intimately tied to our historical past.

Victor Johnson beautifully summarizes our transcendence from the chemistry of neurotransmitters to human emotions:

“Our affects and emotions are the most precious part of human nature. They are the basis upon which we make reasoned decisions. Inscribed into the brain of every human child, each priceless feeling is first evoked by the very same circumstances that dictated life or death in its ancestral environment. ----- New events can **acquire meaning only through their learned association** with these omens of our reproductive success. Viewed from this perspective, our passions and illusions are neither meaningless nor arbitrary, for they alone are responsible for illuminating the darkness and adding love, color and meaning to the silent void of being. Our very nature destines us to experience fear, and love and anger and pain in response to otherwise “meaningless” physical events. “

The Critics go shopping – the make a LIST THEORY

We can try to list some characteristics that make us human. One such feature often invoked is that we walk on two legs, thus leaving our arms free. It would not be accurate to describe Tyrannosaurus Rex or a Kangaroo as having human characteristics. How about prehensile hands then, that can be used for making tools? Since monkeys also own this ability, it also is not uniquely human. Enlargement of the brain occurred in stages in various species of hominids, and some Neanderthals had larger skull capacity than we do. Therefore we cannot claim brain size as our unique heritage either. That leaves specialization of brain function for allowing abstractions, or the use of symbols. This ability enables us to transfer ideas from one generation to the next, in other words, to pass on complex cultural concepts. Homo Erectus made tools, discovered fire, and obviously taught some culture to his offspring. However, not much changed in over 2 million years of stone axe design. In the case of our human use of abstract symbols, each person can and does express himself as an **individual**. Homo Erectus and later Neanderthal culture had little variation. One hand-axe looked like any other axe, perhaps made thousands of years earlier. Individual creativity was almost absent except in some later Neanderthal cave paintings.

The further we look back; the mammalian brain seems to have less ability for generalization and thus abstraction. My dog understands many of the sounds I make but does not have the ability

to generalize easily. She certainly takes no interest in any pictures I paint, nor do I expect her to produce a work of human art. Even if my dog did become artistic, I would not expect to understand her art. She lives in and is aware of a colourless monochrome world of exquisite smells and high-pitched sounds. If she composed a sonata, I would not be able to hear most of it. If she produced a masterpiece of gourmet art, I would never be able to appreciate it. Her painting might appeal to a black and white photographer with a super-human sense of smell.

On the other hand, some chimpanzees have been taught to apply paint to a canvass. Chimps have colour vision like Homo sapiens. Their visual acuity is probably as good as ours. But to produce art, it takes a human to remove the canvass before it gets totally covered. So close, yet no dice. So then, what is it that we do do which can impress others of our own kind?

We are left with that which makes us truly different. It is our ability to string together complexes of abstract symbols (stories) to creatively express our unique human individuality. The very basis of our humanity rests on what we do with the symbolic culture that our mothers passed down to us. (Vernacular) Specifically it depends on how we express ourselves within such a culture. And our most significant and emotionally captivating expressions represent our very best art.

But!

The list of things that we do is very long. Note that this list does NOT include everything that we Homo Sapiens cannot at present do. (Artifacts produced by Aliens and other beings with different senses, such as bats and whales.) The artifacts that we can produce include practically everything we do. For example: painting pictures, composing music, writing books, building bridges, designing

buildings, starting religions, making cars, forging nations,
bioengineering, creating mathematical structures, colonizing Mars,
building Artificial Intelligence entities that we can talk to, etc.

Each of these activities and their results, is an example of uniquely
human artistry. A short listing of the art of being Homo sapien. Or as
the ancient Greeks would have understood it --- the Art of Living.

Dissident (Populist) Viewpoint of Art

Two Russian dissident artists (Komar and Melamid), arriving in New York, decided to find out what appealed to the average American. (Note 4). They wanted to know what type of art would be most appreciated, not by the High Art Elite, but by ordinary people. The results were in line with our ancient preferences. The average American liked landscapes with blue (colour of water), presence of people (perhaps also historical figures like Lincoln), natural settings with some open areas, and some wildlife (game). The study was later repeated in ten other countries. In Finland, preferences were for; a traditional style, lots of blue, natural settings, some wildlife, water (lakes, seas), resemblance to 'reality', a festive mood, and for large (refrigerator door size) paintings. (Note 6).

The interview that Alex Melamid gave to The Nation is very revealing of the state of 'Fine art' in America today from the perspective of a former Russian dissident artist. (Note 5). Melamid thinks that everyone has basic competencies in selecting works of art. These could range from buying a car, decorating a living room, choosing a Brillo box by its cover design, or selecting a urinal for one's bathroom. Some of the rich collectors and buyers of 'Fine art', he finds, are the least knowledgeable about art. They include persons who buy expensive art primarily because it is expensive, and its possession thus boosts their reputation and social status. The overall results of this survey, suggest that average people **are** interested in art, and in fact design, style, colour are factors in their everyday choices.

It also appeared that children below 8 years of age were often attracted to landscapes similar to the ancient Pleistocene savanna and only as adults, did they learn to like more immediate present-day urban environments.

Melamid's survey is not the only one of American popular art. Professor Richard Anderson, a cultural anthropologist, likewise has investigated the richness and the wide spectrum of American art. He comes to a similar conclusion that art permeates the lives of all people and not just the lives of an artistic elite. Anderson in his book 'American Muse' cites four major paradigms of the Western philosophy of art:

1. Mimetic – artworks that portray something
2. Instrumental – art somehow benefits society
3. Emotionalist – art that deals with inner feelings and their external expressions
4. Formalist – use of colour, composition within the artwork itself.

He points out that the Mimetic, Instrumental, and Emotional paradigms existed prior to the separation of 'Fine Arts' from popular arts in general. He finds these concepts appropriate in describing the rich panoply of popular arts extant in present-day American society. This seems to lend credence to an inherent predisposition of ordinary people everywhere to make aesthetic (value) judgements and incorporate art into their daily lives. Indirectly this could also lend support to the 'Savanna hypotheses. However, even these more inclusive concepts of 'popular art' do not encompass all possible definitions of art.

