



The Loss of Art, Love And Empathy: Is There A Way Forward?

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Abstract

This essay argues that notwithstanding the loss of the sacred in art following modernism, a new vision and objective may be forged wherein the inner life is the most significant factor. Such an approach would imbue the expressive potential of art and the creative drive with a sense of love and the recipient with a sense of empathy. However, for this to occur, it is life that ought to assume first priority. First, however one should divest oneself of the hankering for objects and externalities and then from this inner wellspring art can be a mirror of a life, of a society not bent on greed and destruction.

Keywords: art; love; empathy; aesthetics; expressionism

INTRODUCTION

I begin with the assumption or axiom that to create something is an act of love whose source or rationale cannot be known, higher even than the very desire or will to create. Love will be defined as the emotion of feeling an affinity with something else or to something else and a desire to benefit that something else. Art – in its creation of an object – is the expression of such love through an object, be it visual, auditory, kinesthetic and so on. The result is that a good work of art ignites empathy on the part of the recipient. This essay argues that there has been a loss in love in art as well as a desensitizing to art and so a double loss in empathy. The creative act in a hyper technical post-modern world seems to have lost currency. I then endeavor to suggest that the situation is not lost.

Methods

i) Expressionism

The great innovation of expressionism, by which I characterize the post-impressionist, Fauvism, perhaps dadaism, German Expressionism and abstract expressionism as chief exponents. The very idea of expressionism – distortion; emotive gesture, wild color, apparently irrational, often textured surfaces, negation of the literal and empirical and spatial warps – as well as its theoretical formulation in aesthetics, suggests that expressionism is primarily about expressing deep and effulgent emotions. Art is a singular tool to give vent to one's feelings and arouse in the recipient a similar response. The power of art resides in the eliciting of emotions, the emphasis on the artists individuality and a relationship to the "given" that is charged with an intense desire to know it or to revile it, negating an objective distance to it.

Yet in the post-modern world, where humans have been reduced first to animals and now machines, the idea of authentic and true emotions are not that clear. In a world where theories of psychological development, of the biological and cultural - where even language, history and the social dynamics of society have been studied and formalized - the whim of feeling this or that is largely unconscious, conditioned and constructed. In a world of identity politics, continued political strife and power-mongering, the very bastion of knowledge appears fragile at best. In art, the notion of the centered artist or genius, of the masterpiece and innovation or creativity is no longer an assumed truth. The very past is deconstructed and metaphysics is long dead; and religion no longer the dominant paradigm although carrying massive influence, while the process of learning is no longer the same kind of process as in the past with information freely available to anyone, anytime. The result is a sterile culture which precisely lacks in heart, in expressing love.

In this sense, expressionism as a theory and method in art has also passed its due date. Nevertheless, one might argue that in the arts and culture, in innovation in science and technology, there are still pockets of light where the intellect finds its expression emotionally in such forms of practice. The studio, the gallery, the laboratory, the museum, the stadium are holy places. The problem is the commercialization of this and the "knowledge is power" formulae corrupt such holiness. It is reduced to entertainment; fame; monetary value; esteem; institutional power-mongering, even with national and global implications and the race to make more technologies rendering human work unnecessary unless you are a technician or engineer, wherein the humanities, namely the arts and philosophy are regarded as less important or valuable. We live in times where the heart or a wise intellect, a loving intellect, is not praised, but rather measured according to standards that lack empathy, compassion, and sensitivity.

ii) The object

When the object is created – be it a musical piece, a dance ensemble, a theatrical production or a painting, sculpture, drawing and so on, then the tremendous fury of the inner world is vent and concretized as a particular object, a material embodiment. No longer a surrogate of the ephemeral world of ideas and feelings, it occupies time and/or space, is prone to the hazards of a physical object and the law of entropy and is branded for consumption in this world or as is the case most of the time, never even finds an audience. In this sense, is that "inner world" now dead, inanimate "stuff" and no longer ignited with the energy and emotion of its providence.

Is this not the fate of art? The artist, imbued with an inner world of struggle, hope, love and so on now embodied as an object. The object is inert although it could form part of the history of art. That is rare. The object is a commodity to be bought and sold or simply as cultural and intellectual capital. Yet this is also the sheer beauty of material culture, especially of the past. That at a given moment in history, the ideas and feelings of an individual who is said to represent an age assumes form through we cannot easily decode and decipher the meanings of our forebears. Yet, armed within a particular paradigm, such interpretation is not a strict logic and imagination and theorizing are part of the process. Scrutiny of the object happens in the present which itself is circumscribed by a particular paradigm. It could be that knowledge itself is a construction.

A book too is an object before it is a text with meaning. Even a single letter is an object before its formal definition and position within a sign system. Thus, abstraction only has the appearance of truth. The visual precedes the verbal. The world of things precedes meaning and interpretation. Such ruminations thus undermine the ostensible value or truth of the object. To make matters worse, while we cannot abstract the words in a book that construct a meaning, a sense, from the facticity of "a book", implies that the world of things overrun our power of understanding. Consider then the factory which produces more and more things. Chaos has been created.

The object – the work of art – is a bridge or intermediary to the inner world. But since I have thus argued that the fate of the object is unpredictable, means that a) one does not know what the artist was trying to express, b) the artist does not know what he was trying to express and c) the prevailing social dynamics is arbitrary in assigning value to some objects and not others and d) the categorization of objects is defined by an equally arbitrary system we call "the body of knowledge".

What is the outcome of this birth, maturation, withering and death of the object (death as it is abstracted and encoded within a system of value or not judged as such)? It becomes difficult to have sensitivity for and of love through the object. Most objects have nothing to do with such sensitivity. Humankind becomes weakened in its capacity for compassion and empathetic projection – there is just stuff and stuff is equivalent to money and financial gain.

iii) The sacred

Preceding the Modernist turn – reason; the rise of aesthetics; the separation of disciplines, of church and state; the secular turn in the arts; the dramatic rise and power of the scientific method and the move first from an industrial and now digital transformation – one might say that art as such did not exist. The religious or way of life of premodern man was such that "the object" could be accorded religious or sacred value, without awareness of context, cultural conditioning, and the fact that it is but an object, mere stuff or even called "art".

Hegel put it well when he said we no longer worship art; that we have surpassed such "idolatry" so that reason and the pursuit of truth, rather than the limited reality of a physical object, would guide humankind to the Absolute. While such a framing is esoteric, some even describing it as nonsensical, a metaphysics that is old hat, the first part of the argument – that there are no longer sacred objects as art is true, but the rest of the argument – a progress of humankind towards a transcendent reason is perhaps false. Certainly, the great masses still go to temples to venerate things, something that may still be called "idolatry", not realizing that the form assumes function in context and that it is all really a form of art and therefore not really sacred.

With the loss of the sacred, one might say that a higher ideal is also lost. With that, there is no "all seeing" Creator that loves all that It has created by virtue of Its forming, creating, crafting all things lovingly. Such a notion cannot hold,

for there is no unity object – it is a social construction; there is no identity – selves are biological products of an arbitrary process and there is no transcendent Creator that cares for each and every thing and each and every thing pines after It – there is but fragmentation and proliferation of objects, thence decreasing sensitivity and love towards the Invisible, Highest power or Being.

RESULTS

i) Is there hope?

The critique of “expression”, the facticity of the inert object assigned arbitrary value and the loss of the sacred would appear to undermine the power of art and in particular its function to elicit love and empathy. Yet hope is not lost. I say this for in my estimation, the very continued existence of art and the innovations that occur over time (installation art; new media; co-existence of all manner of techniques in traditional disciplines) suggest that the human need for art is not waning. Aesthetics itself is also no longer just a conception that may apply to art or nature, but inheres in the very mundane aspects of life, if only one should be attentive to the nuances of life itself. The aesthetics of the everyday indeed has moved in such a direction, while epistemology and metaphysics are more embodied modes of understanding, suggesting that mind and matter are in some kind of cosmic dance not as dual concepts as Descartes would have it, but in terms of the very embodiment that produces consciousness in the first place. The object, aligned and constituted in a certain way produces mind. The object is not inert after all. And life is sacred. Expression is natural as an organism, even perhaps descriptive of subatomic particles and galaxies!

Art is certainly an illusion. Space has been conquered (perspective); form has been conquered (Classical Greece, High Renaissance onwards); dreams have been investigated (Surrealism); then form has been transcended (abstract art) and art continues to be either rebellious or collusive with larger institutional systems of power. Yet for all that, a painting is just stuff mixed with other stuff – paint, canvas and other materials too – it is not a “window into”; it is not a mimetic copy – and when the lights are switched off and all is dark, suddenly the whole edifice of culture ceases to exist.

The point is to realize that it is not the illusion that one should venerate as the highest principle or form, but rather in its capacity as a sort mnemonic for ideas, feelings and visions that could ennoble life. This is not to argue for “correct” and “good art” which results in censorship, policing and moralizing and brandishing of some, but rather as an “image” or “Sound” that suggests life can be heightened, that life should be beautiful, though this complex word does not mean a series of trivial flower painting, but includes – as art does – the shadow. The latter is to placate such energies for life, so that life should not be an expression of violence and hatred and divide. The illusion is sustained – whether dark or light as a way to make life itself better. Yet the reality is the great majority of people either are simply not exposed to art or simply see “the image” and hear the sound and do not go deeper into its meaning or embrace the emotional depth. Neither is most art any good – most is trivial, repetitive, simply craft and has no vision. Thus, again – is there hope?

ii) Art is just a mirror

The assumption here is that art is somehow at a second order remove from life, some sort of reflection or philosophy in action and expression. Yet the word “reflection” is not necessarily in the sense of a certain intellectual stance in relation to the world. Art may be a product of such a world rather than removed from it, as objective. In the sense, art is a reflection as in a mirror. Art is always mimetic, the product of conscious, subconscious, and superconscious factors (determined by the society and times in which the “artist” finds himself). If this is the case, then art does not have the capacity to transform life. On the contrary, it is itself transformed by life.

Thus, art is not simply expression where the accent is on the creator. It is not simply a new object, but an object determined by say market forces, or the unconscious will of the “creator”. Neither is art sacred – it has no vestige of religious connotations but is a rather late invention that functions in ways different from those first cave painters or artisans of the Middle Ages (ironically even in its biblical tradition, it is now seen as art) or Impressionists seeing the world in new ways and developing new techniques to “reflect” that.

According to this reading, art is one term among many others (science, culture, language, religion, politics...) that are shaped by the lifeworld and as much a fact of its time as the common design of teacups. Accordingly, there is no meaning in art. Hence “arts for arts sake”, formal play, with its empty beauty is all that can be strived for and it no more changes the world than tea cups do. Although a tea ceremony or a cup of tea at the right time or in conversation may be as interesting as a visit to a gallery opening, it is like playing soccer while a war goes on.

iii) A renewed purpose?

The remarks above suggest that art is ineffective for world-bettering, that love, and empathy are not necessarily developed by both practitioner and audience alike. I would, however like to argue for a way forward and a more optimistic prognosis. The wellspring of, as stated in the very beginning as an axiom, is the act of love in the creative act. Therefore, to the extent a person can develop their inner life, by which I mean ideas (thoughts) and emotions (feelings) in

relation to the natural world, in contemplation of nature and in a critical stance to culture, so that person is more likely to create with love or receive art in a manner of empathetic repour.

The purpose of art then is not the creation of objects perse or just expressing “because”, but rather part of the flow of an effervescent, evolving world within. When the within is cared for and developed, then the art and by implication culture will naturally be elevated. It does not work the other way around, although as an educational process exposure to past art (objects) may be necessary to stimulate the kind of journey I am suggesting.

The purpose of art then is a holistic vision toward inner peace and serenity, a feeling of love and awe. The object is the tip of the iceberg. Education: pronouncements of outstanding artists and artworks is a charade – the aim is toward that art should be a natural disposition for art is inclusive and ubiquitous. I maintain if such a culture should become be prevalent, then art would have found its purpose and love and empathy would be more widespread not as an actor playing a role or a musician expertly playing Beethoven, but as the kind of society that is free of violence and divide, but rather one of love and kindness. Such is the true work of art. Art as merely one discipline and a certain range of objects is a limiting and counterproductive definition. Art is invisible. It is made visible when war is no longer the direction of humankind and dedication to the more intangible assumes value. Only then will the tangible seethe with life and even paint or whatever material will produce real meaning – art is an object and yet not an object.

CONCLUSION

In the essay I have problematized the nature of art and whether it has the capacity to elicit love and empathy. I argued that perhaps it cannot – that art is not sacred, that it is commodified and that the world within remains uncharted and unexplored. Nevertheless, I argued that there is hope, that life itself can take on the qualities often associated with art. Beauty and love and empathy are the byproducts of such a sincere search. Then we might also call our art not just beautiful, but true and good and this itself leads to the postmodern deconstruction. Yet the world is not as yet more enlightened than the forebears who have been deconstructed, for the same problems persist. Thus, the root of such ills – greed – needs to be expiated or redirected toward inner growth. If this can happen, we will all be artists and life art.

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