

**ART IS HERE**

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Abstract

In this essay I outline that there is a way of thinking of the art-life schism without the implicit dualism framed in the very understanding of such a dynamic. I argue that art is part of the process of life which implies that art is both ubiquitous and that life can be shaped according to artistic principles, even though at first glance it would appear that life is real and art mere fiction. In fact, I argue that a moral perspective both elevates life and art according to universal ideals and without limiting either creativity in art nor the critique of institutions to shape social spheres. I end with a hopeful plea that this new framing of the art-life divide ought to lead to a shift toward a higher stage of consciousness in the global sense.

Keywords: Art; Aesthetics; consciousness; morality**INTRODUCTION**

The usual framing of the issue concerning the apparent disjunction between art and life is to say either art *is* life, art *is not* life or life *is not* art. In all such versions, the very framing of the question begins with defining two operations which are distinct, entailing an implicit duality. While this approach may appear useful allowing aesthetic appraisal of nature and separating the arts from the so-called mundane, humdrum of life, it is counterproductive. In my estimation, it is also an error and this essay thus argues for the indissoluble integration of both concepts, negating their strict delineation and separation. I argue in fact that art is here at this very present moment in the context of one's very life. In this sense, art is not simply the fine arts and the fine arts are not simply abstract subsets of a more organic or perhaps even less impressive, flow and energy that we call life. Such arguments will be based on three primary arguments in the methods section. I will then determine the results of such an approach or conception and finally conclude with a vision as to the purpose of art, a term which will now be redefined as integral to or as life, and not simply a reflection, perception, distortion, or mimesis of life itself. However, to reach such a "state", it may first be necessary to radically demarcate the definition of each term. Eventually, one does away with the ladder so to speak and the words themselves ("art", "aesthetic", "life") disappear in a wondrous experience.

Method**a) Is art an object?**

It would appear "at first sight" that art of necessity – in being received by at least one of the senses – requires an object, for it is an object (of at least some kind) that gives rise to a sensory experience. What one makes of such an experience is not the point, only that some "object" of necessity is required for there to be what under a certain class of objects is usually referred to as art. Notwithstanding, the manifesto of Conceptual art claimed art is essentially an idea. The Conceptual artist, however still used objects of some description to invoke such ideas. Thus at whatever point in history one turns, art is a class of material objects under some or other description (irrespective if contemporary historical analysis is accurate or not in terms of interpreting or deciphering the codes of material culture of the past). In other words, there can be no idea without assuming some form, whether it be abstract (symbols and signs) or literal (actual "things"). Art can occupy both such forms.

Yet one can delve deeper. Art is an expression of the inner life (to be more precise: true art is the expression of the inner life). This inner life is suffused with feelings and thoughts borne of emotions and intellect. That the person (then)

chooses some material enters the world of action expressing such thoughts and feelings in this snippet of time pales in comparison to the totality of the inner life. Therefore, the manifest world of art – the object – is a passing cloud, a speck of sand upon the beach. Art does not need an object, though the object can serve as a “bridge” to the internal world (one might call this the mystical dimension).

Let’s go deeper still. Life itself (construed as an artwork) is itself only minimally manifest in the material world. The unrevealed (which one could call the future [and in a sense also the past]) far exceeds what at the present time can be experienced and known. Yet (as a manifest artwork) one can know somewhat the “inner state” as revealed in the multifarious multiplicity of creation and of one’s unique experience in life – oneself a peculiar form or object. Life may have taken numerous other forms and its current state too is a passing cloud, a speck of sand upon the beach. Life does not need an object (a particular form), though the object (say nature or human cultural experiences etc.) can serve as a “bridge” to the internal world (one might call this the mystical dimension).

b) Is life beautiful?

It would seem then that since art down the ages has been equated with beauty and the relationship between art and life dissolved – all simply containing “objects” whose expression or ontological existence gives rise to an inner life (of thought and feelings) – that life too would be equated with beauty or as beauty. Yet things would be nice if they were that simple. They are not. This inner life (and thence the forms some of it may assume – by “forms” one might mean things, objects, behaviors, actions of various kinds...) is also an experience of inner turmoil, struggle, pain, and suffering. Such an observation applies to art (at times) and life (at times), yet surely one must strive for beauty? That may apply to life, but not always to art. Yet, to the extent one does so in life, so in art. An act of murder on the stage is not an act of murder and in life it is. That suspension of belief, the second-order reflective stance of art, its imaginative and fictional appeal is surely what separates it radically from life and thus negates my whole argument that such a dualism is actually false?

Again, this is simplistic. Art is both real and fictional. Real in the sense that it is made by actual people within actual circumstances, real even in the sense that it may cause as much joy or despair or whatever as much as any other aspect of life, both creative and destructive. It is fictional in the sense that it is an imaginative construction and an “act”, an illusion, often abstract. Life, however, is not simply real and actual. It too is fictional: what happens in life is mediated by a cognitive process of interpretation or intuition; language is a systematic construction; the cultural space of the lived environment is a construction, and our understanding of the world is not just a construction, but the prevailing paradigm/s of the time. Access to “the real” is not possible. Art is a ripple in the wave of life. Yet the sea is sometimes rough and turbulent.

Thus, we return to the question: Is life beautiful? It could be. It sometimes is so. But not necessarily so and such a reading would apply to the domain of art being a subset of life yet radiating beyond its own set-structure encompassing the larger set we call life. Yet, the point of this essay is not to imagine a relationship between two distinct sets, but to recognize an indissoluble oneness, so that one might say life is here is the same as to say art is here, and more often than not this implies beauty. Beauty is ordered, patterned, creative, healthy (a cancer cell may look good, but judgement discerns in matters of aesthetic “music”); it implies an “inner world” rich with expression, deep emotions and the realm of ideas, that of the intellect.

c) Is nature an object?

Nature is an object of scientific scrutiny. It is also the effulgence of the unmanifest made manifest, that is to say an artistic act and process that brings forth from “the inner realm” or the unmanifest a particular form or object – that is to say an artistic creation. In terms of the latter – as artistic (and not just measurable and manipulated in the sciences), nature mimics the artistic process, but is usually said not to be art, but to entail an aesthetic experience, which is usually best associated with the arts.

Again, such an account is limited. For humans are part of nature. Humans are embroiled in the very processes of nature and the product thereof. Thus, humans are both an artistic creation and the objects of scientific study. They share qualities and properties with other living forms and are constituted with the basic elements that populate the universe as a whole. Thus nature – both as observer and participator – is an object whether one calls such an unfolding process art or life does not negate its integral effect on and as culture and in its pristine state, as untouched by human culture.

Nature, whether in its pristine state or as an object of science and technology or as conceived in terms of art, as with the analysis of “art” and “life”, reveals both a beauty and terror, violence, destruction, pain and death (yes, people have died both directly and indirectly from art!). In this sense, nature as an object is itself part of the very conception of our new liquid which is neither art nor life, but has produced something else. Nature might well be the necessary conduit or catalyst that propels our initially distinct elements (“art” and “life”) to form a new, merged composite. Yet, as part of that process, as a component of nature, humans themselves are transformed in the forming of this new state or modality. Such characterizes the different periods in history, though we may have no way of knowing if our knowledge of the past is accurate. What we do know is that right here and right now we are existing beings, both an object of study and a subject that so studies (creates, discovers, invents, copes, acts, feels, thinks...). Nature is an object, but it is conscious in varying

degrees of complexity, the apex being human as far as we know, as the very unique product of the evolution of matter, time-and-space.

RESULTS

a) **There is only life: the moral argument**

Given the argument that art and life are integrated, that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is questionable, one is inclined to still argue that life is real and art, a mere playful illusion. When someone dies, it is a final outcome, a real event, a fact which is simply not the case in the context of art. Yet, depending on the paradigm under which one operates, death need not be seen as final and life, as the bard would say. Is merely a “poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage”.

Most aspects of life are not a matter of freewill: one’s environment, one’s family, one’s physical, mental and emotional make-up, whether one is to be rich or poor and so on. One might be able to change one’s station in life and improve oneself, but certain things remain fixed and given and one is certainly conditioned by the society in which one happens to find oneself. There is one area where we perhaps do have freewill: moral acts. Even though again this may be relative to one’s social context and level, a human being can choose whether to act with moral conviction or not.

Given that art is a ripple on the wave of life, art too can either be moral or not. There is a long history of writing on the edifying qualities of art and of what constitutes its true purpose. Similarly, a life well lived is surely one where one has the consciousness and sensitivity to have acted appropriately and in accord with moral principles. Art too would be more spiritual if it were ignited with the same awareness. Of course, the arguments as to what this morality consists of and the fact that to uphold the law need not always be good if the laws in the first place are corrupt or simply, dead wrong and certain situations require dissent, even violence and rebellion.

Art has often then questioned the status quo with an intense moral conviction. I am not going to define morality as such, though basic laws seem eternal and immovable, such as not to murder, steal, commit sexual immoralities, spread falsehoods and the like. Again, each of these norms needs to be defined and there are usually exceptions to any rule. However, they do seem fundamental and therefore a life well lived and an art well-conceived ought to adhere and even promulgate such principles.

In fact, one might go even further and claim adherence to these laws is a movement in line with the very heart of life and while this may not necessarily mean an easy life, it certainly is healthy and spiritually in tune. Yet what of art that lives on the boundary. Consider Mapplethorpe’s photographs of nude males. It caused a stir and moral arguments were brought against it. Or even in the Renaissance where artists deviated from the usual techniques of representing biblical themes and rendered the fleshy body in life-like proportions, which may have also been considered immoral. The list is long in this regard. Are such examples against the spirit of the moral argument?

The answer may be that such examples, where subject matter and techniques were radically altered, are not against such basic moral values and in fact, one might argue progress in the arts in terms of such new methodologies, just like those of science (which initially met with heavy disparagement from the Church on so-called moral grounds), are in fact beneficial to society intellectually and emotively and thus digression and dissent and originality in the various branches of knowledge ought to be lauded.

Thus life expressed in terms of moral fortitude is the crucial area in which one has free will and only in extreme cases would preclude certain art. Thinkers such as Plato were rather prudish in his evaluation of art and only sanctioned a very specific kind of art as worthy of an enlightened state. Such censorship is I believe damaging to the arts (and thus to life) and while I do not say that any art is good, I would say more art is better, just as I would say a life led by moral principles is the good life, while not specifying the bounds of our knowledge on moral grounds. The first anatomy class may have appeared to be horrid, even immoral, but it has proven beneficial for medicine and the development of human culture, survival and knowledge.

b) **There is only life: the consciousness argument**

If the various aspects of life or expressions thereof – be it sport, art, grooming, lovemaking, education, shopping, conversation and so on and so forth – are all defined as mere ripples on the surface of life, then I conjecture that every aspect of life (except that devoid of moral content, howsoever a murderer may even define his rampages as “artistic” or “life heightened”) is aesthetic which is to say shares properties with art or even is simply art, just as art is a natural part of all the various expressions that make up life, irrespective of the depth of the “inner life”, the unmanifest and unrevealed content, the realm of ideas. Thus, the appellation high art and low art, high culture and low culture, art and craft, aesthetics concerning the fine arts and that of everyday aesthetics – all such dualities evaporate.

What I am arguing for is a kind of premodern integration of life’s processes that preceded modernism and its separation of disciplines and expressions. Yet, now having overcome premodernisms’ lack of consciousness with the

Enlightenment and the rule of reason, into the postmodern with its flavor for not trying to find a single paradigm, but celebrating difference, we need a further step in the evolutionary consciousness of humans. For it is the evolution of consciousness towards greater wisdom, knowledge and sensitivity that is the hallmark of any noble society. And while Christian West tried to “civilize” others which is to say convert them to their belief-system and ways of life, the kind of consciousness that I refer to is not the ideology of a particular society or dogmatic religion. Only this works if we accept, however, a moral code that is universally binding.

c) A shift in consciousness

This essay argues for a society where art is seamlessly part of everyday life. It may first require basic education in the arts, both theoretical and practical, and then – whether or not someone decides to continue expressing through the arts – graduates to a sense that art is in all things, in the phenomenological awareness of existence itself among other sentient beings and amidst the beauty of nature and that may even include mundane activities if done with an openness to an aesthetic experience in all dimensions of being and doing. Again, such a vision is of a just and moral society universally sensitive to being kind and good, where artistic expression is one modality of life and may encompass all other domains of life, should such “a right attitude” prevail.

Such a utopia only abides when humankind applies these moral principles and one might imagine a world where laws, police, armies, security systems and so on were no longer needed, since the ills of society would be expunged from the inside out, through a transformation of the mind, heart and soul of man and not mandated politically, by religion or any Institution of power. It would require inner work and the eradication of greed, power-mongering, violence and ignorance. Such a vision is certainly far beyond where societies the worlds over are at presently, but should we at least incline to such a dream, then life and art would be one and beauty would be its only intent and product, where suffering and pain will no longer offset one’s experience of life, though death shall remain which may yet be the ultimate experience of consciousness.

CONCLUSION

What then is the purpose of art?

Such an arcadia may be a reality should we a) make arts education more widespread, b) integrate other domains of knowledge and experience as also being artistic and c) finally recognizing that life itself is art. Art is here!

Although it may be difficult to argue for a system of universal morality as being the true measure of spiritual development, I believe it is indispensable if society is to be improved. I have tackled such a hopeful outlook with the argument that art has a significant role to educate, uplift and enlighten and that it entails moral sentiments, which then apply not simply to art or as art but as part of the very processes of life and lifestyles itself.

The vision that I outline suggests that dualistic thinking is problematic and a tendency towards monism, rather than undermining discursive thinking, in fact invites the creative play usually associated with art to all domains and kinds of experiences. Thus, life is no longer fragmented, categorized into separate niches, unrelated and specialized – instead the vision is one of holism, unity, and inclusivity. However, this rests on the proviso that human consciousness develops, and that immorality is expunged. Art will be here, that is to say, present now, if only our view of life expands and we all become more embracing, where violence, greed and ignorance are not the dominant credo. I hold to the notion that art can propel humankind in this direction. Art that is like a child’s blissful expression, and not the institutions that uphold it, manipulate it, commercialize it, taunt it or simply remain ignorant of it. I am reminded here of Reinhardt’s classical, geometric abstract paintings and his “art as art” polemic. It would appear that such an iconoclastic, clinical, pure, and abstract work eschews the tumult of life. Yet beneath such paintings breathes the spirit of life, imbued with a sense of refinement and precision. Of course, this is but one possible form or object. Art, nay life, proliferates.

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