



Beyond the surface, beyond arts' leftist slant: An argument for meaning in art with reference to five principles

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.10459743](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10459743)

Submission Date: 11 Dec. 2023 | Published Date: 05 Jan. 2024

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Abstract

This article outlines a vision for the arts that retrieves meaning within the artwork, a meaning that can only result out of a rejection of the narrative of art theory and practice. The postmodern attempt to do just that fails as I argue that it is precisely the postmodern turn that has tended to an extreme leftist positioning that has left in its wake an anti-metaphysical approach to art and touts a narrative that simply categorizes the artist in terms of identity politics, while the art-object is servile to this rather dangerous philosophy in its lack of moral conviction. I argue that rather a true space for the individual, for actual meaning and a vision of art that leads to a better world should be the direction if art is to have real value (that is, touch life positively). I draw on five principles that may lead in such a direction for I would not be the first to claim that most art is not true (or good), a tradition that goes as far back as Plato's analysis of the arts.

Keywords: Art; leftist-politics; meaning-making; metaphysics; responsibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay seeks to redress what I consider a deep-seated problem in the creation, reception, and education in the arts, and in particular in the field that I am most interested in, namely painting. I refer here to the lack of intellectual discursiveness in the evaluation of art, but more worrying, in its very creation, the province of so-called artists. In other words the dearth of meaning-making, with populist assumptions that taste is subjective; an anything-goes philosophy; relativism; a hermeneutic range of explanations without any coherence and even sense and a post modern shift where meaning simply amounts to the regional, national, ethnic and perhaps religious identity of the artist, with little reference to meaning and ideas, but rather an overplaying of context, social relevance and perceived challenge to Western values, in the so-called rhetoric of the "other", the marginalized, the oppressor-oppressed narrative and so on. In this light, I wish to give meaning back to art from within, where the artist as an individual ought to take responsibility for his art, confer meaning therein over and above such issues and leftist power-mongering, and a failure to do so renders art vacuous, superficial, and lacking in art as such. In fact, this essay is particularly relevant where this lack of inner direction and meaning in the overly leftist slant of the art-world and so-called intellectual academicism, is timely in a world where such views are often dangerous, where art bolsters this agenda and moral clarity is often lost. I disclose five principles that may resolve this intellectual paucity in the arts and its potentially dangerous ramifications.

2. 5 principles:

The following principles take as the epicenter the artist. This is not some old-hat modernist notion, but rather the idea that the onus of responsibility and meaning-making resides primarily with the artist. I reject the idea of the incoherent, inarticulate artist. I reject the idea that the artist is just the puppet of his times, of the whims of others or that he simply does not know what he is doing. I also reject the idea that the artist should simply fit within the system, or that art is simply entertainment and the painter simply a conjurer of visual music.

Such a view is not antiquated and not without provenance, as artists extracted themselves from first subservience to the religious order, then to subservience to materialism and nationalism and finally broke with any predefined definition of art in both modern and post-modern art practice. Furthermore, many artists, particularly pioneers of abstract art, and later conceptual art, defined and intellectually explained their work and processes. Creativity is not just spontaneity or illogical; in fact, it is highly attuned logic garbed in imaginative flexibility. Art practice will always precede art theory.

2.1. Taking responsibility

The manifestos that characterized modernist art is in my view a high point of the arts. Here, individual artists and/or collectives defined what they were doing and sought innovative methods to pry open nature, the inner realm and even the transcendental. I consider this not simply a passing phase in the arts, not simply the purview of white, male, Western values, but a rigorous, responsible, and even enlightening approach. This is a reference to abstract art in general and Abstract Expressionism in particular. Contrast this with the advent of pop art and Warhol's intentional emptiness, surface value over meaning and depth, and a seemingly sophisticated nihilism.

To contest such negative energy, this tendency toward entropic death, the artist ought to counter as such with an injection of meaning, a meaning borne out by rigorous intellectual argument and debate. I reject artists that just paint "and do not know how, or why" or are simply adept technically, churning out the same images year after year to the applause of an adoring crowd, a sort of Jeff Koons emptiness.

It would appear that the educational system at universities and art schools in fact demands that artists discursively explain their work. But this is a charade. In general, this is not the case. While degrees may be awarded and some young artists may even meet with success in the art world, few can actually articulate what their art means. Other than art that appears to rebel and promote the "other" or fix the identity of the artist, especially the so-called disenfranchised of the Western elite, are sure to meet with such success, with scant regard to meaning and the proliferation of ideas latent in such art, other than the social and leftist discourse. The fact that Universities support this – elite institutions – only confirms the agenda and give official sanction to this narrative.

While there is of course some truth to the reevaluation of hierarchies and binaries, the discourse has become rather extreme, where the artwork itself morphs into whether it supports "queer culture" or "black" and "Hispanic" agendas or any formally oppressed groups (except Jews it would appear) with scant regard to anything deeper. Gone are the days of metaphysics or spirituality in mainstream art and therein lies the deplorable state of contemporary art. It also means the inauguration of moral relativism, that is, the inability to claim any absolute, universal moral standard; the erosion of values, and all in the guise of liberalism said to embody principles of equality, fairness, and individual rights. Instead, what has happened is that reality itself has become a fiction obfuscating facts and art subsequently becomes an agenda of "local stories" and protest, where the apparent individuality of the artist is drowned in talk of social and political concerns, with few interested in making metaphysical claims or courageous enough to call for a moral reevaluation, rather the art world is simply a game of ego and power, in the deceiving guise of something intellectual, cultural.

Of course, there is much "deep" and "good" work created by well-meaning artists who do have a vision (a manifesto, if you will), but the modernist days of the "centered artist" and the qualities of such seer-like abilities, are all by gone. In my estimation, it is not sufficient for an artist simply to argue – "oh, well I liked looking at the view so I painted it" or "these colors are pretty and remind me of a hot, summers day" or "this represents Tongan art" – such sentiments are too general and vague to mean anything, and I propose that the artist should seek at as a sophisticated intellectual explanation of his own processes, and the technical ability that allows such images and forms to be rendered in the first place.

In other words, my contention that art, or let me say true art is a highly conscious process even as it engages sub-conscious processes. Such a balance allows for its creative play and evolutionary formation over time. The reason one knows of certain artists is not only because of their artistic output, but also their theoretical writings and notetaking. It is not simply some guy that can paint portraits on street corners. The talent of such a person is admirable, sometimes visionary, but it is still not true art, true art defined by its being a "new creation", a process of the unfolding and expression of the artist as he makes anew with each painting. Modernism's power is striking because in 50 years the Classical norm which had taken hold for 300 – 400 years and preceded by symbolic religious painting for a further 1500 years, radically transformed, so that art took a major leap forward with modernism as it extricated itself from traditional and religious hierarchies. I think in post modernism it has begun to serve liberal, leftist tendencies – and often in the extreme sense. For example, there is a category called "queer art" which is now rather mainstream. While I hold nothing against the LGBTQ movement in general, it has nothing to do with whether the art has quality, and if its just about such an identity, that is as stupid as saying Picasso was straight. Art is not only the sexual urge or at least this is not the most fundamental definition of a human being.

It is incumbent upon the true artist to fight for true art.

2.2. Light and Dark

However, when one looks at it, the essential components of rendering nature on a two-dimensional surface require the modulation of light and dark. This applies equally well to the abstract and abstraction. Now this is not a simple matter. The very awareness as such perceptually is a conceptual truth. The conceptual truth is that there is an all-pervasive duality: light and the absence of light. The coordination of these dualities is not a death of one at the expense of the other, but a harmony and this is what accounts to the pictorial reality of a surface. Whether modulation of tone in natural form or simply the pictorial reality of an abstract painting. This insight came from nature as any cursory observation of the empirical world would confirm, and is now applied in the realm of art.

But there are deeper overtones. “Light and dark”, symbiosis, dance or struggle, is a metaphor for the continuous action of the struggle of life, of nature; the inner battles of the psyche and mind and the emotional movement within a human soul. On infinite micro and infinite macro levels or at least a vast amount in both tending to zero dimensions and that of cosmic scale, is reflected in this mystical dance of attraction and repulsion, of expanse and contraction, reverberating on the final level of reality, namely the natural forms we observe around us, the many creatures of at least on the earth and the individual human being. Yet this “light and dark” texture extending to the animal, the organic and even the inanimate, then rendered and woven with the tales of human history, mythology and religious belief through the arts, art only having transcended this into its own separate discipline and the subsequent emancipation of the artist, heralding modernism, only to be usurped by the art world cultural mongering of leftists treating art as identity politics, social activism and gender issues that serve larger governmental and commercial interests.

Thus, the true nature of the “light and dark” is revealed as the Promethium struggle against such institutions and the decline of true art, the decline of values within life itself, so that the artist may perform a rectification by sticking to art that is metaphysical, where light triumphs over darkness, paradoxically through their very dialectic. Art thus is redemptive once again, so that its divine origins in magic, communication with higher spirits and the like and its power as an ideological tool, is still as relevant in premodern times as it is today. Only now the battle is lost as leftists have expunged art of any metaphysical role or depth.

It is incumbent on the true artist to thus fight for true art.

2.3. Unlearning the history of art

Unlearning history only has meaning if one first knows that history. Therefore, debunking it without learning it is dangerous and yet this is how it is taught. The result is a certain narrative or paradigm becomes dominant: the oppressor versus the oppressed. With scant regard to the art these narrative textures the perception of past art and sees as enlightened, contemporary art. Is this not always the mistake as new generations emerge? However, more essentially still is not simply to be aware of the prevailing cannon, but also to 1) appreciate art history (theory and practice, 2) see through it as but a fiction including the current apparent rebellion and self-appraised hedonism and nihilism of leftist extremes and 3) reclaim one’s own narrative as an artist.

Unfortunately, since the first step is left out, there is no foundation. Unlearning art history – theory and practice – means to reject both a modernist and post-modernist account. Its ultimate end is a Dadaist destruction of art to replace by an inspired (art) life. We recognize the narrative of art (history) has merely been constructed with the apparent voice of reason. Yet reason itself has a shaky foundation, as the logic of sets demonstrates with Russel’s paradox. It also means that one is free of its shackles and what remains, the vision of the individual artist.

Yet individual idiosyncrasies are as prevalent as opinions. What renders the true artist true and the art true art, is whether his individuality is bound with a transcendent force, and he directs himself toward that, with art as expression of that, even if it does mean confronting pain. Yet as hitherto discussed, this naturally manifests light and dark.

2.4. Art is not Life.

There is a tacit rule that one would not actually shoot and kill someone on stage in order to represent (“to act out”) a murder scene in a theatrical production. Art is therefore inherently moral and good. Life is not so. In life, terribly evil things happen. Therefore, art is not life, even if at times, when life is, as it were poetic, that art is life. Thus, the beautiful mission of art, if it is true art, is to uplift the world where life is art, where just as in the play no one is actually violently assaulted or murdered, so in life moral law will rule. This is not despotic tyranny; it is basic morals. Sadly, this is not the agenda of many, and the art world is often supportive of such ethical negligence.

This is why art is an indispensable part of true education. It offers vision, creativity, inspiration, and beautiful ideas, not to mention the pleasure of practicing it. It is a subset of life that ought to be nourished as it grows to encompass life and a rectified world.

2.5. Embracing the sub-conscious

The practice of art (and even writing) at optimal tilt is finding a flow, a state of blissful creative output with little interference from the conscious mind. This does not contradict my earlier assertion or principle that the artist must invest a conscious, articulate meaning to his art. Indeed, it is the play between these states – the visual and verbal – that gives the art coherence and meaning. In the very balance between these alternating states in parallel with the earlier principle of light and dark, that higher vibrational frequency may occur. This is what makes the reception of art and not only its creation an aesthetic act. And the ultimate level of being is making all an aesthetic act where art encompasses life and violence ceases from the earth.

The sub-conscious thinks in images. It is the right brain. In kabbalah, it is chochmah, or wisdom, which is the inkling of an idea, the creative act that comes from nothingness. It may be inspired far higher still, from keter, the crown, associated with will. Our society, our institutions, are too left brained. A balance can only be restored when art is considered equally important as that of science. This is an easy step when one realizes that science is also art and art is also science. How so? Both offers visions of the world, both are cultural practices, both are commercial concerns, both are aesthetic and so on. That is why a single letter of script in Hebrew, the root of all languages, is both a visual and verbal reality and merges the forces of creation in that single instantiation especially in the Torah. This is my narrative, one of the principles mentioned above as one is both grateful and dismissive of the official paradigm and history of art and ideas, and it is to this that the true artist upholds.

3. CONCLUSION

The failure to make a distinction between fact and imagination is the death of both art and life. On the other hand, when good and true dreams, acts of the imagination, become reality then art and life are truly alive, and the distinction is not even necessary. These 5 principles lead me to this conclusion as I have in this essay presented them. The point really is that I am first an artist and only as an after thought reflect upon it and yet it is this latter step that truly gives art meaning as the image assumes meaning, not simply cultural capital, but meaning. However, in a world beset by great darkness the meaning is concealed. That is why I argued in the first principle that it is the artist that ought to take responsibility and give his work conceptual depth, a failure to attempt this or a feeble one, is not true art, however technically astute.

I argued that the steps to achieve this are not easy: One has to know the history of art, see through it, including postmodern attempts to debunk it with its various narratives, and then find one's own voice, and more importantly for that to have any depth beyond one's own ego, to connect that to a project of transcendent import. In this regard, I take it upon myself to give metaphysical dimensions of meaning to my art. I suppose art was always in some way there to fulfil a didactic function.

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CITATION

Daniel Shorkend. (2024). Beyond the surface, beyond arts' leftist slant: An argument for meaning in art with reference to five principles. In Global Journal of Research in Humanities & Cultural Studies (Vol. 4, Number 1, pp. 1–4). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10459743>