

# Evaluating art



How ought one to go about evaluating a work of art? The first thing I learned as an art major at St. Johns was how to evaluate a work of art or one that was in progress, often times it was a piece we got to pick at the Met or the Momma. Sometimes it was our classmate's work that we had to critique and evaluate. It was this process that drove me away from the Art department. There was too much nit picking and it got to be a pain in the ass to sit there and listen to some power hungry professor ripping apart my classmates work. What I took away was that you have to break your evaluation down into four stages.

First you have to hold your personal and emotional opinions, Second you have to understand the time period the completed work of art was created in, third you have to understand that craft behind the art and the language and finally you have a summation which leads to either an appreciation or an un appreciation. You may like or dislike the subject matter, or composition and colors or maybe even the theme but this is fine and understandable and inevitable but if you want to evaluate the work, set your emotional responses aside momentarily. How does the work make you feel? Angry? Bored? Jealous?

Patriotic? Happy? Sleepy? Sneeze? Pick a feeling. Use your gut in the beginning because you can always change your mind later if the context of the work changes your perception over time. The idea here is to focus on consumption. According to Pierre Bourdieu consumption is the first stage in the act of communication. In this case the goal is to evaluate and you need to be able to communicate first before doing that. Before you do any of that,

you need to consume and absorbed the artwork. Now try, as specifically as you can, to understand the work's historical placement and significance.

What is the work's historical context? Is it a war anthem? A counterpoint to a political view? Try to place the work within a historical and or political framework as best as you can. Lets take Norman Rockwell for example; to truly understand and consume his art you must understand that in his time he was “ beached by history”, that is how Danto put it. At his time history was Cubism, Futurism, and Surrealism but Rockwell went in an other direction. That is what makes his work so iconic, this aspect is essential to know be for evaluating his pieces.

This is not a question of " good or bad". Often the apparent lack of craft, may, in fact, be precisely the intent of the artist. In this case one would have to agree that the work is crafted " well"; to its purpose and intent. The intention of the craftsmanship must be understood to ground the idea. Then we can begin to understand and talk relevantly about it. What is the artist's relation to his or her craft? How does the artist's approach to craft? Does the artist achieve the desired effect? Also very important, does the artist provoke an emotional reaction.

The whole nature of evaluating the goodness or badness of something arises from how that thing relates to some purpose or goal. Is a rain storm good or bad? Well, that depends on whether you are a farmer hoping for a drought to break or a backpacker hoping to keep his sleeping bag dry. The goodness or badness isn't an intrinsic property of the thing, but rather how the properties of the thing relate to some goal against which it is being judged. The fact

that something impedes or promotes a goal is a matter of objective fact which can be studied and evaluated.

To be certain, it is impossible to objectively evaluate Art “ man made objects”. The Art " world" exists outside of the general public, it easily maintains its mysteriousness and requires some specialized knowledge and or study; the language of art criticism and the economics surrounding Art further distancing itself from the public. In other words when money is involved it is far more logical to be evaluative before you interpret. One usually comes before the other because there is always two sides to an argument.

What people forget is that Art simply asks us to exercise our understanding of the world and our relationship to it. Art provides us access to a language beyond the constraint of words. In fact in our heads we translate words into images, sounds, emotions and memories often times they are meaningless reference points. Art then takes us directly to the source of referencing and merely asks that we engage it with the same way we engage the rest of our world. In essence, evaluate it the same way you would a relationship, an event, or a sandwich. After you take the first bite you can go ahead and interpret what you found.