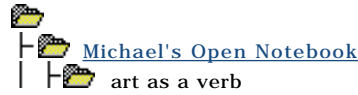


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Art as a Verb
by Eric Booth

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Art exists for more than art's sake. What I am interested in is the work of art. In its Indo-European origins, the root for art was a verb, and it meant "to put things together." It referred to something you did, not the thing you made, and it took skill. "Skill" originally was a verb, too, and not a verb of the hands; skill was defined as a mental capacity, the ability to draw distinctions, and it developed (in Old Norse) to mean discernment. "Aesthetic," too, was a verb in its Greek origin, meaning to perceive. The philosopher John Dewey proposed that the opposite of aesthetic is anesthetic, being devoid of sensation.

So: Art is putting together; skill is the invisible mental capacities that can lead to good performance; aesthetic is the action of complex understanding.

Art is very close to what all of us do when we are doing our best work. When you report on the excellent work the plumber did on your annoying heating problem, you might call it "a beautiful job." An ultimate compliment you might give for a marvelous dinner is "it was a work of art." While our institutional art system thinks it has a copyright on those words, we instinctively apply them to fine performances in non-artistic media.

Art exists in the absorption in the tasks of putting existing things together in ways that have meaning; and inversely, in the engagements that make personal connections to things others have made. The media we commonly refer to as the arts (primarily music, dance, theater, visual and literary arts) offer particularly rich rewards for such art-work -- that is why they have survived so long and been so popular. But they don't own the copyright on art.

Everyone has the basic competencies of art, the potential for engaging in art, and the birthright to work toward its rewards no matter what their profession or education. The skills of art live in the minds and hearts of all people.

The work of art, in whatever medium we choose to play, keeps us alive and questioning -- any medium we invest ourselves in becomes a medium for the work of

art. We find meaning, refresh our curiosity, wake up out of the various anesthetics of modern life, through challenge and accomplishment with those inner skills. So, while art-snobs may deride the value of the subtle artistic practices in life, it is the natural action that keeps us going toward our best.

I go a step further to state that the work of art performed by the absorbed accountant, by the creative librarian, is the same kind as those performed by masters in the arts. I refer to the difference as "capital A" Art (the stuff that institutions and experts designate as Art) and "small a" art (all the other occasions that engage the bergs of art, but that don't qualify by the institutional definition). This latter sense of art lies more in the inner action, the quality of the interaction, the questions and answering, than in the outer media and final results. Art and art are made of the same stuff; art is Art in chrysalis; both make a world of difference to our lives.

Some people in the arts reject this connection; they feel Art is degraded when connected to art. But in my experience, an awareness of art is the best possible entry into a passion for Art. It does not denigrate Shakespeare to say that a marketing executive who is creating a plan to launch a new product is absorbed in some of the same actions, problems, and choices that Will faced writing his plays. On the contrary, an appreciation of the common challenges enriches the exec's appreciation of Shakespeare's accomplishments.

I am appalled by the degree to which the skills that produce these art-engagements are ignored in education and life. These are the very capacities that make for personal satisfaction, for effective work, for long-term relationships, and for lifelong learning. These are not skills for a genius-few who can make valuable items for special and set-aside institutions. These are the skills that perceive well everywhere, that put all kinds of things together effectively, not just musical notes and pigment blobs. These are the skills of discernment that construct the quality of life. We need art so that we don't die of reality.

The actions and skills of a redefined art took me several chapters to describe in my book *The Everyday Work of Art*. However, let me mention some of the basics, which include these capacities:

- to notice well
- to be attuned to what attracts you so that you find relevance everywhere
- to respond authentically
- to make strong and flexible personal connections to things
- to attend to impulses
- to feel natural curiosity
- to ask good questions
- to make informed choices and see the consequences.

To engage in the work of art one must be able to set aside preconceptions and expectations, to not-know effectively enough to take a step toward a new understanding. The artist-in-life is courageous enough to participate and play; the everyday artist makes stuff she loves, every day, as a habit, at the job and at home.

This is art as I view it. Not Art apart, but art at the heart.

I have heard the dismissal of this view: "Then anything is art. My kid makes a few scribbles with a crayon, and that is art?" That is the classic art-as-a-noun argument. I don't know about that kid's drawing. I would have to talk to the child: What was going on inside her as she made the lines? What led her to choose those colors and shapes? Those are the questions that count for people, those are the issues that take us toward art. Meanwhile the noun-based binary judgments of is/isn't and good/bad push us closer to the edge of the flat-earth of most people's relationship to Art.

There would be serious consequences if we were to pursue this emphasis of art as a verb as opposed to a noun. One of the key changes would come from the realization that the action of art is almost indistinguishable from optimum learning. Schools would have to change. Art would stop being a peripheral embellishment to education, and would move the heart of the classroom.

More than schools would change. Art institutions would change; they would become the leading proponents of amateur activity in their various disciplines.

Businesses, which have been in the lead on exploring the value of art for improving workplace performance, would begin to develop programs and plans that focus on the inner skills of art and the satisfaction they provide for productive performance.

And connoisseurs: Ah, here we have the figurehead term carved at the prow of the

art-as-a-noun point of view. These are the Art experts whose informed judgments turn thumbs up or down on the fate of art-nouns. Connoisseurs may feel they have the most to lose in the redefinition of art toward the verb. I think not. Look at the root of the word. Etymologically, a connoisseur is not one who possesses a lot of noun-stuff like knowledge and expertise; no, etymologically, a connoisseur is one who is adept at coming to know, in any medium or subject matter. A connoisseur is a master learner. And when connoisseurs can attend to art as a verb, can point the art-ship in a different direction, we begin to put things together in ways that wake us all up to the complex, multidimensional beauty that surrounds us.

Eric Booth, an award-winning Shakespearean actor, teaches at the Julliard School, and is founding director of the Teacher Center at the Leonard Bernstein Center. He has written three books on American Cultural analysis. His newest book is The Everyday Work of Art (Sourcebooks, Inc., 1997).

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