

VitalSource Bookshelf: Humanities through the Arts

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Chapter 2

WHAT IS A WORK OF ART?

No definition for a [*work of art*](#) seems completely adequate, and none is universally accepted. We shall not propose a definition here, therefore, but rather attempt to clarify some criteria or distinctions that can help us identify works of art. Since the term “work of art” implies the concept of “making” in two of its words—“work” and “art” (short for “artifice”)—a work of art is usually said to be something made by a person. Hence, sunsets, beautiful trees, “found” natural objects such as grained driftwood, “paintings” by insects or songs by birds, and a host of other natural phenomena are not considered works of art, despite their beauty. You may not wish to accept the proposal that a work of art must be of human origin, but if you do accept it, consider the construction shown in Figure 2-1, Jim Dine’s *Shovel*.

Shovel is part of a valuable collection and was first shown at an art gallery in New York City. Furthermore, Dine is considered an important American artist. However, he did not make the shovel himself. Like most shovels, the one in his construction, although designed by a person, was mass-produced. Dine mounted the shovel in front of a

painted panel and presented this construction for serious consideration. The construction is described as “mixed media,” meaning it consists of several materials: paint, wood, a cord, and metal. Is *Shovel* a work of art?

We can hardly discredit the construction as a work of art simply because Dine did not make the shovel; after all, we often accept objects manufactured to specification by factories as genuine works of sculpture (see the Calder construction,

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[Figure 5-10](#)). [Collages](#) by Picasso and Braque, which include objects such as paper and nails mounted on a panel, are generally accepted as works of art. Museums have even accepted objects such as a signed urinal by Marcel Duchamp, one of the **Dadaist** artists of the early twentieth century, which in many ways anticipated the works of Dine, Warhol, and others in the [Pop Art](#) movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

FIGURE 2-1

Jim Dine, *Shovel*. 1962. Mixed media. Using off-the-shelf products, Dine makes a statement about the possibilities of art.

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Identifying Art Conceptually

Three criteria for determining whether something is a work of art are that (1) the object or event is made by an artist, (2) the object or event is intended to be a work of art by its maker, and (3) recognized experts agree that it is a work of art. Unfortunately, one cannot always determine whether a work meets these criteria only by perceiving it. In

many cases, for instance, we may confront an object such as *Shovel* (Figure 2-1) and not know whether Dine constructed the shovel, thus not satisfying the first criterion that the object be made by an artist; or whether Dine intended it to be a work of art; or whether experts agree that it is a work of art. In fact, Dine did not make this particular shovel, but because this fact cannot be established by perception, one has to be told.

PERCEPTION KEY Identifying a Work of Art

1. Why not simply identify a work of art as what an artist makes?
2. If Dine actually made the shovel, would *Shovel* then unquestionably be a work of art?
3. Suppose Dine made the shovel, and it was absolutely perfect in the sense that it could not be readily distinguished from a mass-produced shovel. Would that kind of perfection make the piece more a work of art or less a work of art? Suppose Dine did not make the shovel but did make the panel and the box. Then would it seem easier to identify *Shovel* as a work of art?
4. Find people who hold opposing views about whether *Shovel* is a work of art. Ask them to point out what it is about the object itself that qualifies it for or disqualifies it from being identified as a work of art.

Identifying art conceptually seems to us as not very useful. Because someone intends to make a work of art tells us little. It is the *made* rather than the *making* that counts. The third criterion—the judgment of experts—is important but debatable.

Identifying Art Perceptually

Perception, what we can observe, and conception, what we know or think we know, are closely related. We often recognize an object because it conforms to our conception of it. For example, in architecture we recognize churches and office buildings as distinct because of our conception of what churches and office buildings are supposed to look like. The ways of identifying a work of art mentioned in the previous

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section depend on the conceptions of the artist and experts on art and not enough on our perceptions of the work itself.

We suggest an approach here that is simple and flexible and that depends largely on perception. The distinctions of this approach will not lead us necessarily to a definition of art, but they will offer us a way to examine objects and events with reference to whether they possess artistically perceivable qualities. And in some cases at least, it should bring us to reasonable grounds for distinguishing certain objects or events as art. We will consider four basic terms related primarily to the perceptual nature of a work of art:

Artistic form":?the organization of a medium that results in clarifying some subject matter

Participation":?sustained attention and loss of self-awareness

Subject matter":?some value expressed in the work of art

Content":?the interpretation of subject matter

Understanding any one of these terms requires an understanding of the others. Thus, we will follow what may appear to be an illogical order: artistic form; participation; participation and artistic form; content; subject matter; subject matter and artistic form; and, finally, participation, artistic form, and content.

Artistic Form

All objects and events have form. They are bounded by limits of time and space, and they have parts with distinguishable relationships to one another. Form is the interrelationships of part to part and part to whole. To say that some object or event has form means it has some degree of perceptible unity. To say that something has **artistic form**, however, usually implies a strong degree of perceptible unity. It is artistic form that distinguishes a work of art from objects or events that are not works of art.

Artistic form implies that the parts we perceive—for example, line, color, texture, shape, and space in a painting—have been unified for the most profound effect possible. That effect is revelatory. Artistic form reveals, clarifies, enlightens, and gives fresh meaning to something valuable in life, some subject matter. A form that lacks a significant degree of unity is unlikely to accomplish this. Our daily experiences usually are characterized more by disunity than by unity. Consider, for instance, the order of your experiences during a typical day or even a segment of that day. Compare that order with the order most novelists give to the experiences of their characters. One impulse for reading novels is to experience the tight unity that artistic form usually imposes, a unity almost none of us comes close to achieving in our daily lives. Much the same is true of music. Noises

and random tones in everyday experience lack the order that most composers impose.

Since strong, perceptible unity appears so infrequently in nature, we tend to value the perceptible unity of artistic form. Works of art differ in the power of their unity. If that power is weak, then the question arises: Is this a work of art? Consider Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* ([Figure 4-10](#)) with reference to its artistic form. If its parts were not carefully proportioned in the overall structure of the painting, the tight balance that produces a strong unity would be lost. Mondrian was so

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concerned with this balance that he often measured the areas of lines and rectangles in his works to be sure they had a clear, almost mathematical, relationship to the totality. Of course, disunity or playing against expectations of unity can also be artistically useful at times. Some artists realize how strong the impulse toward unity is in those who have perceived many works of art. For some people, the contemporary attitude toward the loose organization of formal elements is a norm, and the highly unified work of art is thought of as old-fashioned. However, it seems that the effects achieved by a lesser degree of unity succeed only because we recognize them as departures from our well-known, highly organized forms.

Artistic form, we have suggested, is likely to involve a high degree of perceptible unity. But how do we determine what is a high degree? And if we cannot be clear about this, how can this distinction be helpful in distinguishing works of art from things that are not works of art? A very strong unity does not *necessarily* identify a work of art.

That formal unity must give us insight into something important.

Consider the news photograph—taken on one of the main streets of Saigon in February 1968 by Eddie Adams, an Associated Press photographer—showing Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, then South Vietnam’s national police chief, killing a Vietcong captive (Figure 2-2). Adams stated that his picture was an accident, that his hand moved the camera reflexively as he saw the general raise the revolver. The lens of the camera was set in such a way that the background was thrown out of focus. The blurring of the background helped bring out the drama of the foreground scene. Does this photograph have a high degree of perceptible unity? Certainly the experience of the photographer is evident. Not many amateur photographers would have had enough skill to catch such a fleeting event with such stark clarity. If an amateur

FIGURE 2-2

Eddie Adams, *Execution in Saigon*. 1968. Silver halide. Adams captured General Loan’s execution of a Vietcong captive. He said later, “The general killed the Vietcong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world.”

©Eddie Adams/AP Photo

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FIGURE 2-3

Francisco Goya, *May 3, 1808*. 1814–1815. Oil on canvas, 8 feet 9 inches × 13 feet 4 inches. The Prado, Madrid. Goya’s painting of Napoleonic soldiers executing Spanish guerrillas the day after the Madrid insurrection portrays the faces of the victims, but not of the killers.

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had accomplished this, we would be inclined to believe that it was more luck than skill. Adams’s skill in catching the scene is even more evident, and he risked his life to get it. But do we admire this work the

way we admire Siqueiros's *Echo of a Scream* ([Figure 1-2](#))? Do we experience these two works in the same basic way?

Compare a painting of a somewhat similar subject matter—Goya's *May 3, 1808* (Figure 2-3). Goya chose the most terrible moment, that split second before the crash of the guns. There is no doubt that the executions will go on. The desolate mountain pushing down from the left blocks escape, while from the right the firing squad relentlessly hunches forward. The soldiers' thick legs—planted wide apart and parallel—support like sturdy pillars the blind, pressing wall formed by their backs. These are men of a military machine. Their rifles, flashing in the bleak light of the ghastly lantern, thrust out as if they belonged to their bodies. It is unimaginable that any of these men would defy the command of their superiors. In the dead of night, the doomed are backed up against the mountain like animals ready for slaughter. One man flings up his arms in a gesture of utter despair—or is it defiance? The uncertainty increases the intensity of our attention. Most of the rest of the men bury their faces, while a few, with eyes staring out of their sockets, glance out at what they cannot help seeing—the sprawling dead smeared in blood.

With the photograph of the execution in Vietnam, despite its immediate and powerful attraction, it takes only a glance or two to grasp what is presented. Undivided attention, perhaps, is necessary to become aware of the significance of the event, but not sustained attention. In fact, to take careful notice of all the details—such as the

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patterns on the prisoner's shirt—does not add to our awareness of the significance of the photograph. If anything, our awareness will be

sharper and more productive if we avoid such detailed examination. Is such the case with the Goya? We believe not. Indeed, without sustained attention to the details of this work, we would miss most of what is revealed. For example, block out everything but the dark shadow at the bottom right. Note how different that shadow appears when it is isolated. We must see the details individually and collectively, as they work together. Unless we are aware of their collaboration, we are not going to grasp fully the total form.

Close examination of the Adams photograph reveals several efforts to increase the unity and thus the power of the print. For example, the flak jacket of General Loan has been darkened so as to remove distracting details. The buildings in the background have been "dodged out" (held back in printing so that they are not fully visible). The shadows of trees on the road have been softened so as to lead the eye inexorably to the hand that holds the gun. The space around the head of the victim is also dodged out so that it appears that something like a halo surrounds the head. All this has been done in the act of printing sometime after the picture was taken. Careful printing helps achieve the photograph's artistic formal unity.

Yet we are suggesting that the Goya has a higher degree of perceptible unity than Adams's photograph, that perhaps only the Goya has artistic form. We base these conclusions on what is given for us to perceive: the fact that the part-to-part and the part-to-whole relationships are much stronger in the Goya. Now, of course, you may disagree. No judgment about such matters is indisputable. Indeed, that is part of the fun of talking about whether something is or is not a work of art—we can learn how to perceive from one another.

PERCEPTION KEY Adams and Goya

1. How is the painting different from Adams's photograph in the way the details work together?
2. Could any detail in the painting be changed or removed without weakening the unity of the total design? What about the photograph?
3. Does the photograph or the painting more powerfully reveal human barbarity?
4. Do you find yourself participating more with the Adams photograph or the Goya painting?
5. How does blurring out the buildings in the background of the photograph improve its visual impact? Compare the effect of the looming architecture in the painting.
6. What do the shadows on the street add to the significance of the photograph? Compare the shadows on the ground in the painting.
7. Does it make any significant difference that the Vietcong prisoner's shirt is checkered? Compare the white shirt on the gesturing man in the painting.
8. Is the expression on the soldier's face, along the left edge of the photograph, appropriate to the situation? Compare the facial expressions in the painting.
9. Can these works be fairly compared when one is in black and white and the other is in full color? Why or why not?

10. What are some basic differences between viewing a photograph of a real man being killed and viewing a painting of such an event? Does that distinction alone qualify or disqualify either work as a work of art?

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Participation

Both Adams's photograph (Figure 2-2) and the Goya (Figure 2-3) tend to grasp our attention. Initially for most of us, probably, the photograph has more pulling power than the painting, especially as the two works are illustrated here. In its setting in the Prado in Madrid, however, the great size of the Goya and its powerful lighting and color draw the eye like a magnet. But the term "participate" is more accurately descriptive of what we are likely to be doing in our experience of the painting. With the Goya, we must not only give but also sustain our undivided attention so that we lose our self-consciousness—our sense of being separate, of standing apart from the painting. We participate. And only by means of participation can we come close to a full awareness of what the painting is about.

Works of art are created, exhibited, and preserved for us to perceive with not only undivided but also sustained attention. Artists, critics, and philosophers of art (aestheticians) generally are in agreement about this. Thus, if a work requires our participation in order to understand and appreciate it fully, we have an indication that the work is art. Therefore—unless our analyses have been incorrect, and you should satisfy yourself about this—the Goya would seem to be a work of art. Conversely, the photograph is not as obviously a work of art as the painting, and this is the case despite the fascinating impact of the

photograph. Yet these are highly tentative judgments. We are far from being clear about why the Goya requires our participation and the photograph may not. Until we are clear about these “whys,” the grounds for these judgments remain shaky.

Goya’s painting tends to draw us on until, ideally, we become aware of all the details and their interrelationships. For example, the long, dark shadow at the bottom right underlines the line of the firing squad, and the line of the firing squad helps bring out the shadow. Moreover, this shadow is the darkest and most opaque part of the painting. It has a forbidding, blind, fateful quality, which in turn reinforces the ominous appearance of the firing squad. The dark shadow on the street just below the forearm of General Loan seems less powerful. Sustained attention or participation cannot be achieved by acts of will. The splendid singularity of what we are attending to must fascinate and control us to the point that we no longer need to will our attention. We can make up our minds to give our undivided attention to something. But if that something lacks the pulling power that grasps our attention, we cannot participate with it.

The ultimate test for recognizing a work of art, then, is how it works in us, what it does to us. [Participative experiences](#) of works of art are communions—experiences so full and fruitful that they enrich our lives. Such experiences are life-enhancing not just because of the great satisfaction they may give us at the moment but also because they make more or less permanent contributions to our future lives. Does da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* ([Figure 1-5](#)) heighten your perception of a painting’s underlying structure, the power of simplicity of form, and the importance of a figure’s pose? Does Robert Herrick’s “The Pillar of Fame” ([Chapter 1](#)) affect your concept of fame? Do you see shovels

differently, perhaps, after experiencing *Shovel* by Dine (Figure 2-1)? If not, presumably they are not works of art. But this assumes that we have really participated with these works, that we have allowed them to work fully in our experience, so that if the meaning or content were present, it had a chance to reveal itself to our awareness. Of the four basic distinctions—subject matter, artistic

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form, content, and participation—the most fundamental is participation. We must not only understand what it means to participate but also be able to participate. Otherwise, the other basic distinctions, even if they make good theoretical sense, will not be of much practical help in making art more important in our lives. The central importance of participation requires further elaboration.

As participators, we do not think of the work of art with reference to categories applicable to objects—such as what kind of thing it is. We grasp the work of art directly. When, for example, we participate with Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 2-4), we are not making geographical or geological observations. We are not thinking of the mountain as an object. If we were, *Mont Sainte-Victoire* would pale into a mere instance of the appropriate scientific categories. We might judge that the mountain is a certain type. But in that process, the vivid impact of Cézanne's mountain would be lessened as the focus of our attention shifted beyond in the direction of generality. This is the natural thing to do with mountains if you are a geologist.

When we are participators, our thoughts are dominated so much by something that we are unaware of our separation from that something. Thus, the artistic form initiates and controls thought and feeling. We

see the Cézanne—name it, identify its maker, classify its style, recall its background information—but this approach will not lead us into the Cézanne as a work of art. Of course, such knowledge can be very helpful, but only when it is under the control of our experience of participating with the painting. Otherwise, the painting will fade away. Its splendid specificity will be sacrificed for some generality. Its content or meaning will be missed.

FIGURE 2-4

Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. 1886–1887. Oil on canvas, 23½ × 28½ inches. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. Cézanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire in Aix, France, throughout his life. Local legend is that the mountain was home to a god and therefore a holy place.

©Painting/Alamy

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These are strong claims, and they may not be convincing. In any case, before concluding our search for what a work of art is, let us seek further clarification of our other basic distinctions—artistic form, content, and subject matter. Even if you disagree with the conclusions, clarification helps understanding. And understanding helps appreciation.

Participation and Artistic Form

The participative experience—the undivided and sustained attention to an object or event that makes us lose our sense of separation from that object or event—is induced by strong or artistic form.

Participation is not likely to develop with weak form because weak form tends to allow our attention to wander. Therefore, one indication of a strong form is the fact that participation occurs. Another indication of artistic form is the way it clearly identifies a whole, or

totality. In the visual arts, a whole is a visual field limited by boundaries that separate that field from its surroundings.

Both Adams's photograph (Figure 2-2) and Goya's painting (Figure 2-3) have visual fields with boundaries. No matter what wall these two pictures are placed on, the Goya will probably stand out more distinctly and sharply from its background. This is partly because the Goya is in vibrant color and on a large scale—eight feet nine inches by thirteen feet four inches—whereas the Adams photograph is normally exhibited as an eight by ten-inch print. However carefully such a photograph is printed, it will probably include some random details. No detail in the Goya, though, fails to play a part in the total structure. To take one further instance, notice how the lines of the soldiers' sabers and their straps reinforce the ruthless forward push of the firing squad. The photograph, however, has a relatively weak form because a large number of details fail to cooperate with other details. For example, running down the right side of General Loan's body is a very erratic line that fails to tie in with anything else in the photograph. If this line were smoother, it would connect more closely with the lines formed by the Vietcong prisoner's body. The connection between killer and killed would be more vividly established.

Artistic form normally is a prerequisite if our attention is to be grasped and held. Artistic form makes our participation possible. Some philosophers of art, such as Clive Bell and Roger Fry, even go so far as to claim that the presence of artistic form—what they call "significant form"—is all that is necessary to identify a work of art. And by "significant form," in the case of painting, they mean the interrelationships of elements: line to line, line to color, color to color, color to shape, shape to shape, shape to texture, and so on. The

elements make up the artistic medium, the "stuff" the form organizes. According to Bell and Fry, any reference of these elements and their interrelationships to actual objects or events should be basically irrelevant in our awareness.

According to the proponents of significant form, if we take explicit notice of the executions as an important part of Goya's painting, then we are not perceiving properly. We are experiencing the painting not as a work of art but rather as an illustration telling a story, thus reducing a painting that is a work of art to the level of commercial communications. When the lines, colors, and the like pull together tightly, independently of any objects or events they may represent, there is a significant form. That is what we should perceive when we are perceiving a

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work of art, not a portrayal of some object or event. Anything that has significant form is a work of art. If you ignore the objects and events represented in the Goya, significant form is evident. All the details depend on one another and jell, creating a strong structure. Therefore, the Goya is a work of art. If you ignore the objects and events represented in the Adams photograph, significant form is not evident. The organization of the parts is too loose, creating a weak structure. Therefore, the photograph, according to Bell and Fry, would not be a work of art. "To appreciate a work of art," according to Bell, "we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions."

Does this theory of how to identify a work of art satisfy you? Do you find that in ignoring the representation of objects and events in the

Goya, much of what is important in that painting is left out? For example, does the line of the firing squad carry a forbidding quality partly because you recognize that this is a line of men in the process of killing other men? In turn, does the close relationship of that line with the line of the long shadow at the bottom right depend to some degree on that forbidding quality? If you think so, then it follows that the artistic form of this work legitimately and relevantly refers to objects and events. Somehow artistic form goes beyond itself, referring to objects and events from the world beyond the form. Artistic form informs us about things outside itself. These things—as revealed by the artistic form—we shall call the “content” of a work of art. But how does the artistic form do this?

Content

Let us begin to try to answer the question posed in the previous section by examining more closely the meanings of the Adams photograph (Figure 2-2) and the Goya painting (Figure 2-3). Both basically, although oversimply, are about the same abstract idea—barbarity. In the case of the photograph, we have an example of this barbarity. Since it is very close to any knowledgeable American’s interests, this instance is likely to set off a lengthy chain of thoughts and feelings. These thoughts and feelings, furthermore, may seem to lie “beyond” the photograph. Suppose a debate developed over the meaning of this photograph. The photograph itself would play an important role primarily as a starting point in a discussion of man’s inhumanity to man.

In the debate about the Goya, every detail and its interrelationships with other details become relevant. The meaning of the painting may

seem to lie “within” the painting. And yet, paradoxically, this meaning, as in the case of the Adams photograph, involves ideas and feelings that lie beyond the painting. How can this be? Let us first consider some background information. On May 2, 1808, guerrilla warfare had flared up all over Spain. By the following day, Napoleon’s men were completely back in control in Madrid and the surrounding area. Many of the guerrillas were executed. And, according to tradition, Goya portrayed the execution of forty-three of these guerrillas on May 3 near the hill of Principe Pio just outside Madrid. This background information is important if we are to understand and appreciate the painting fully.

The execution in Adams’s photograph was of a man who had just murdered one of General Loan’s best friends and had then knifed to death his wife and six children. The general was part of the Vietnamese army fighting with the assistance of the United States, and this photograph was widely disseminated with a caption describing the victim as a suspected terrorist. What shocked Americans who saw

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the photograph was the summary justice that Loan meted out. It was not until much later that the details of the victim’s crimes were published.

With the Goya, the background information, although very helpful, is not as essential. Test this for yourself. Would your interest in Adams’s photograph last very long if you completely lacked background information? In the case of the Goya, the background information helps us understand the where, when, and why of the scene. But even

without this information, the painting probably would still grasp and hold the attention of most of us because it would still have significant meaning. We would still have a powerful image of barbarity, and the artistic form would hold us on that image. In the Prado Museum in Madrid, Goya's painting continually draws and holds the attention of innumerable viewers, many of whom know little or nothing about the rebellion of 1808. Adams's photograph is also a powerful image, of course—and probably initially more powerful than the Goya—but the form of the photograph is not strong enough to hold most of us on that image for very long.

With the Goya, the abstract idea (barbarity) and the concrete image (the firing squad in the process of killing) are tied tightly together because the form of the painting is tight. We see the barbarity in the lines, colors, masses, shapes, groupings, and lights and shadows of the painting itself. The details of the painting keep referring to other details and to the totality. They keep holding our attention. Thus, the ideas and feelings that the details and their organization awaken within us keep merging with the form. We are prevented from separating the meaning or content of the painting from its form because the form is so fascinating. The form constantly intrudes, however unobtrusively. It will not let us ignore it. We see the firing squad killing, and this evokes the idea of barbarity and the feeling of horror. But the lines, colors, mass, shapes, and shadowings of that firing squad form a pattern that keeps exciting and guiding our eyes. And then the pattern leads us to the pattern formed by the victims. Ideas of fatefulness and feelings of pathos are evoked but they, too, are fused with the form. The form of the Goya is like a powerful magnet that allows nothing within its range to escape its pull. Artistic form fuses or embodies its meaning with itself.

In addition to participation and artistic form, then, we have come upon another basic distinction—**content**. Unless a work has content—meaning that is fused or embodied with its form—we shall say that the work is not art. Content is the meaning of artistic form. If we are correct (for our view is by no means universally accepted), artistic form always informs—has meaning, or content. And that content, as we experience it when we participate, is always ingrained in the artistic form. We do not perceive an artistic form and then a content. We perceive them as inseparable. Of course, we can separate them analytically. But when we do so, we are not having a participative experience. Moreover, when the form is weak—that is, less than artistic—we experience the form and its meaning separately.

PERCEPTION KEY Adams and Goya Revisited

We have argued that the painting by Goya is a work of art and the photograph by Adams is questionable. Even if the three basic distinctions we have made so far—artistic form, participation, and content—are useful, we may have misapplied them. Bring out every possible argument against the view that the painting is a work of art and the photograph may not be a work of art.

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Subject Matter

The content is the meaning of a work of art. The content is embedded in the artistic form. But what does the content interpret? We shall call it subject matter. Content is the interpretation—by means of an artistic form—of some subject matter. Thus, **subject matter** is the fourth basic distinction that helps identify a work of art. Since every work of

art must have a content, every work of art must have a subject matter, and this may be any aspect of experience that is of human interest. Anything related to a human interest is a value. Some values are positive, such as pleasure and health. Other values are negative, such as pain and ill health. They are values because they are related to human interests. Negative values are the subject matter of both Adams's photograph (Figure 2-2) and Goya's painting. But the photograph, unlike the painting, has no content. The less-than-artistic form of the photograph simply *presents* its subject matter. The form does not transform the subject matter, does not enrich its significance. In comparison, the artistic form of the painting enriches or interprets its subject matter, says something significant about it. In the photograph, the subject matter is directly given. But the subject matter of the painting is not just there in the painting. It has been transformed by the form. What is directly given in the painting is the content.

The meaning, or content, of a work of art is what is revealed about a subject matter. But in that revelation you must infer or imagine the subject matter. If someone had taken a news photograph of the May 3 executions, that would be a record of Goya's subject matter. The content of the Goya is its interpretation of the barbarity of those executions. Adams's photograph lacks content because it merely shows us an example of this barbarity. That is not to disparage the photograph, for its purpose was news, not art. A similar kind of photograph—that is, one lacking artistic form—of the May 3 executions would also lack content. Now, of course, you may disagree with these conclusions for very good reasons. You may find more transformation of the subject matter in Adams's photograph than in Goya's painting. For example, you may believe that transforming the

visual experience in black and white distances it from reality while intensifying its content. In any case, such disagreement can help the perception of both parties, provided the debate is focused. It is hoped that the basic distinctions we are making—subject matter, artistic form, content, and participation—will aid that focusing.

Subject Matter and Artistic Form

Whereas a subject matter is a value—something of importance—that we may perceive before any artistic interpretation, the content is the significantly interpreted subject matter as revealed by the artistic form. Thus, the subject matter is never directly presented in a work of art, for the subject matter has been transformed by the form. Artistic form transforms and, in turn, informs about life. The conscious intentions of the artist may include magical, religious, political, economic, and other purposes; the conscious intentions may not include the purpose of clarifying values. Yet underlying the artist's activity—going back to cavework ([Figure 1-1](#))—is always the creation of a form that illuminates something from life, some subject matter.

Artistic form draws from the chaotic state of life, which, as van Gogh describes it, is like “a sketch that didn't come off”—a distillation. In our interpretation, a work of art creates an illusion that illuminates reality. Thus, such paradoxical declarations as

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Delacroix's are explained: “Those things which are most real are the illusions I create in my paintings.” Or Edward Weston's “The photographer who is an artist reveals the essence of what lies before the lens with such clear insight that the beholder may find the

recreated image more real and comprehensible than the actual object." Camus: "If the world were clear, art would not exist." Artistic form is an economy that produces a lucidity that enables us better to understand and, in turn, manage our lives. Hence, the informing of a work of art reveals a subject matter with value dimensions that go beyond the artist's idiosyncrasies and perversities. Whether or not Goya had idiosyncrasies and perversities, he did justice to his subject matter: He revealed it. The art of a period is the revelation of the collective soul of its time.

Participation, Artistic Form, and Content

Participation is the necessary condition that makes possible our insightful perception of artistic form and content. Unless we participate with the Goya (Figure 2-3), we will fail to see the power of its artistic form. We will fail to see how the details work together to form a totality. We will also fail to grasp the content fully, for artistic form and content are inseparable. Thus, we will have failed to gain insight into the subject matter. We will have collected just one more instance of barbarity. The Goya will have basically the same effect on us as Adams's photograph except that it may be less important to us because it happened long ago. But if, on the contrary, we have participated with the Goya, we probably will never see such things as executions in quite the same way again. The insight that we have gained will tend to refocus our vision so that we will see similar subject matters with heightened awareness.

Look, for example, at the photograph by Kevin Carter (Figure 2-5), which was published in the *New York Times* on March 26, 1993, and which won the Pulitzer

FIGURE 2-5

Kevin Carter, *Vulture and Child in Sudan*. 1993. Silver halide. Carter saved this child but became so depressed by the terrible tragedies he had recorded in Sudan and South Africa that he committed suicide a year after taking this photograph.

©Kevin Carter/Sygma/Getty Images

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Prize for photography in 1994. The form isolates two dramatic figures. The closest is a starving Sudanese child making her way to a feeding center. The other is a plump vulture waiting for the child to die. This powerful photograph raised a hue and cry, and the *New York Times* published a commentary explaining that Carter chased away the vulture and took the child to the feeding center. Carter committed suicide in July 1994.

PERCEPTION KEY Adams, Goya, and Carter

1. How does our discussion of the Adams photograph affect your response to Carter's photograph?
2. To what extent does Carter's photograph have artistic form?
3. Why are your answers to these questions fundamentally important in determining whether Adams's photograph, Carter's photograph, Goya's painting, or all of them are works of art?
4. Describe your experience regarding your participation with either Adams's or Carter's photograph or Goya's painting. Can you measure the intensity of your participation with each of them? Which work do you reflect upon most when you relax and are not thinking directly on the subject of art?

5. The intensity of your reactions to the Adams and Carter photographs may well be stronger than the intensity of your experience with the Goya. If so, should that back up the assertion that the photographs are works of art?

Artistic Form: Examples

Let us examine artistic form in two examples of work by an anonymous cartoonist and Roy Lichtenstein. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Lichtenstein became interested in comic strips as subject matter. The story goes that his two young boys asked him to paint a Donald Duck "straight," without the encumbrances of art. But much more was involved. Born in 1923, Lichtenstein grew up before the invention of television. By the 1930s the comic strip had become one of the most important of the mass media. Adventure, romance, sentimentality, and terror found expression in the stories of Tarzan, Flash Gordon, Superman, Wonder Woman, Steve Roper, Winnie Winkle, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Batman and Robin, and the like.

The purpose of the comic strip for its producers is strictly commercial. And because of the large market, a premium has always been put on making the processes of production as inexpensive as possible. And so generations of mostly unknown commercial artists, going far back into the nineteenth century, developed ways of quick, cheap color printing. They developed a technique that could turn out cartoons like the products of an assembly line. Moreover, because their market included a large number of children, they developed ways of producing images that were immediately understandable and striking.

Lichtenstein reports that he was attracted to the comic strip by its stark simplicity—the blatant primary colors, the ungainly black lines

that encircle the shapes, the balloons that isolate the spoken words or thoughts of the characters.

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He was struck by the apparent inconsistency between the strong emotions of the stories and the highly impersonal, mechanical style in which they were expressed. Despite the crudity of the comic strip, Lichtenstein saw power in the directness of the medium. Somehow the cartoons mirrored something about ourselves. Lichtenstein set out to clarify what that something was. At first people laughed, as was to be expected.

However, Lichtenstein saw how adaptable the style was for his work. He produced a considerable number of large oil paintings that, in some cases, referred specifically to popular cartoon strips. They were brash in much the same way cartoons are, and they used brilliant primary colors that were sensational and visually overwhelming. Much of his early work in this vein involved war planes, guns, and action scenes. For him the cartoon style permitted him to be serious in what he portrayed.

Examine Figures 2-6 and 2-7. Lichtenstein saw artistic potential for the anonymous cartoon panel with a woman tearing up in reaction to an unknown problem. Because these two representations of a sad woman are detached from the narrative in which the original cartoon appeared, we are left to respond only to the image we see.

Lichtenstein did not expect that his painting would relate to any missing narrative: It was made to stand alone. However, the anonymous cartoon was created in greater haste partly because its significance would have been understood in a dramatic context.

FIGURE 2-6

Anonymous cartoon panel.

FIGURE 2-7

Roy Lichtenstein, *Hopeless*. 1963. Magna on canvas.

©Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

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PERCEPTION KEY Cartoon Panel and Lichtenstein's Transformation

1. Begin by establishing which formal elements are similar or the same in both works. Consider the shape of the face and hair, the features of the woman.
2. Then establish what Lichtenstein removed from the original cartoon. What seems to you the most important omission? Does it strengthen or weaken the overall visual force of the work?
3. The power of the line makes cartoons distinct. Compare the strength of the line in each work. Which is more satisfying? Which is stronger?
4. What has Lichtenstein added to the composition? What has he changed from the original?
5. Is it fair to say one of these is a work of art and the other is not? Or would you say they are both works of art?
6. Is either of these works an example of artistic form? How would you describe artistic form?

7. Discuss with others who have seen these works what you and they think is their subject matter. Do they have the same content?

Hopeless treats an emotional moment that is familiar to everyone who has ever been involved in the breakup of a love affair. Comparing the two panels, it is clear that Lichtenstein has simplified the portrayal of the woman by making her hair light in color, thus changing the focal point of the image. In the cartoon the hair is the darkest form, taking up the most room and attention in the panel. Lichtenstein's revision shifts the viewer's attention to the face. By smoothing out the tone of the skin—by removing the mechanical "dots" in the cartoon version—he makes the face more visually prominent. The addition of the fingers gives the viewer the sense that the woman is holding on. By placing the balloon (with the dialogue) close to the woman's ear and removing the background—very prominent in the cartoon—Lichtenstein gives the woman's representation much more space in the panel. These are subtle differences, and while both panels treat the same subject matter, it seems to us that the content of the Lichtenstein is greater and more significant because his control of artistic form informs us more fully of the circumstances represented in the painting. Compare our analyses of these works. You may disagree with our view but, if so, make an effort to establish your own assessment of these two examples in terms of artistic form.

Examine Figure 2-8, Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting*.

PERCEPTION KEY Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting*

1. Compare the painter's arms. How effective is their contrast in

terms of their movement and their pose?

2. How does the simplicity of the background help clarify the essential form of the painter? What are the most powerful colors in the composition?
3. What is the figure actually doing? How does Gentileschi make us aware of her action?

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4. Place yourself in the same pose as Gentileschi. How would you paint yourself in that position?
5. What forms in the painting work best to achieve a visual balance? Which forms best express a sense of energy in the painting?
6. How does Gentileschi achieve artistic form? If you think she does not achieve it, explain why.
7. The painting is titled *Allegory*. Allegory is a special kind of symbol; what is this painting a symbol for? Does it work for you as a symbol?
8. How does answering these questions affect your sense of participating with the painting?

FIGURE 2-8

Artemisia Gentileschi, Rome 1593–Naples 1652, *Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*. Circa 1638–1639.

©Fine Art Images/Superstock

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We feel this is a particularly powerful example of artistic form. For one thing, Gentileschi's challenge of painting her own portrait likeness in this pose is extraordinary. It has been supposed that she may have needed at least two mirrors to permit her to position herself. Or her visual memory may have been unusually powerful. Artemisia Gentileschi was one of the most famous female artists of the seventeenth century. This painting was done in England for King Charles I and remains in the Royal Collection. The painting is an *allegory*, which is to say it represents the classical idea of the painter, which was expressed as female, Pittura. Because no male painter could do a self-portrait as Pittura, Gentileschi's painting is singular in many respects. The color of her clothing—silken, radiant—is rich and appropriate to the painter. Her right arm is strong in terms of its being brilliantly lighted as well as strong in reaching out dramatically in the act of painting. Her clothing and décolletage emphasize her femininity. Her straggly hair and the necklace containing a mask (a symbol of imitation) were required by the conventional allegorical representations of the time describing Pittura. The contrasting browns of the background simplify the visual space and give more power to the figure and the color of her garment. One powerful aspect of the painting is the light source. Gentileschi is looking directly at her painting, and the painting—impossibly—seems to be the source of that light.

The subject matter of the painting seems to be, on one level, the idea of painting. On another level, it is the act of painting by a woman painter. On yet another level, it is the act of Artemisia Gentileschi painting her self-portrait. The content of the painting may be simply painting itself. On the other hand, this was an age in which women rarely achieved professional status as royal painters. The power of the

physical expression of the self-portrait implies a content expressing the power of woman, both allegorically and in reality. Artemisia is declaring herself as having achieved what was implied in having the allegory of painting expressed as a female deity.

As in the painting by Goya and the photograph by Adams, the arms are of great significance in this work. Instead of a representation of barbarity, the painting is a representation of art itself, and therefore of cultivated society. The richness of the garment, the beauty of Artemisia, and the vigor of her act of painting imply great beauty, strength, and power. We are virtually transfixed by the light and the urgency of the posture. Some viewers find themselves participating so deeply that they experience a kinesthetic response as they imagine themselves in that pose.

What significance does the artistic form of the painting reveal for you? How would you describe the content of the painting? Would the content of this painting be different for a woman than for a man? Would it be different for a painter than for a non-painter? What content does it have for you?

Subject Matter and Content

While the male nude was a common subject in Western art well into the [Renaissance](#), images of the female body have since predominated. The variety of treatment of the female nude is bewildering, ranging from the Greek idealization of erotic love in the *Venus de Milo* to the radical reordering of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. A number of female nude studies follow (Figures 2-9 through 2-18). Consider, as you look at them, how the form of the work interprets the female body. Does it reveal it in such a

way that you have an increased understanding of and sensitivity to the female body? In other words, does it have content? Also ask yourself whether the content is different in the two paintings by women compared with those by men.

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FIGURE 2-9

Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus*. 1508–1510. Oil on canvas, 43 × 69 inches. Gemaldegalerie, Dresden.

Giorgione established a Renaissance ideal in his painting of the goddess Venus asleep in the Italian countryside.

©Superstock

FIGURE 2-10

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Bather Arranging Her Hair*. 1893. Oil on canvas, 36³/₈ × 29¹/₈ inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Chester Dale Collection. Renoir's impressionist interpretation of the nude provides a late-nineteenth-century idealization of a real-life figure who is not a goddess.

Source: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Chester Dale Collection

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FIGURE 2-11

***Venus de Milo*. Greece. Circa 100 BCE. Marble, 5 feet ½ inch. Louvre, Paris.** Since its discovery in 1820 on the island of Cyclades, the *Venus de Milo* has been thought to represent the Greek ideal in feminine beauty. It was originally decorated with jewelry and may have been polychromed.

©DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY

FIGURE 2-12

***Rokeby Venus*. Circa 1647–1651. 48 × 49.7 inches (122 × 177 cm). National Gallery, London.**

Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus (Toilet of Venus)* is an idealized figure of the goddess. Cupid holds a mirror for Venus to admire herself.

©VCG Wilson/Corbis/Getty Images

FIGURE 2-13

Tom Wesselmann, 1931–2004, *Study for Great American Nude*. 1975. Watercolor and pencil, 19½ × 54 inches. Private collection. Wesselmann's study leaves the face blank and emphasizes the telephone as a suggestion of this nude's availability in the modern world.

Art: ©Estate of Tom Wesselmann/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: ©Connaught Brown, London/Bridgeman Images

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FIGURE 2-14

Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. 1912. Oil on canvas, 58 × 35 inches.

Philadelphia Museum of Art. Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection. This painting provoked a riot in 1913 and made Duchamp famous as a chief proponent of the distortions of cubism and modern art at that time.

©Association Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2017. Photo: ©Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia/Art Resource, NY

FIGURE 2-15

***Standing Woman*. Ivory Coast. Nineteenth or twentieth century. Wood and beads, 20³/₈ × 7⁵/₈ × 5³/₈ inches. Detroit Institute of Arts.** *Standing Woman* was once owned by Tristan Tzara, a friend of Picasso. Sculpture such as this influenced modern painters and sculptors in France and elsewhere in the early part of the twentieth century. It is marked by a direct simplicity, carefully modeled and polished.

©Detroit Institute of Arts/Bridgeman Images

FIGURE 2-16

Suzanne Valadon, *Reclining Nude*. 1928. Oil on canvas, 23⁵/₈ × 30 inches. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Robert Lehman Collection, 1975. Valadon interprets the nude simply, directly. To what extent is the figure idealized?

Source: Robert Lehman Collection, 1975/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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FIGURE 2-17

Alice Neel, *Margaret Evans Pregnant*. 1978. Oil on canvas, 57³/₄ × 38 inches. Collection, John McEnroe Gallery. Neel's *Margaret Evans Pregnant* is one of a series of consciously anti-idealized nude portraits of pregnant women.

Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London. ©The estate of Alice Neel

FIGURE 2-18

Philip Pearlstein, *Two Female Models in the Studio*. 1967. Oil on canvas, 50¹/₈ × 60¹/₄ inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen B. Booke. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Pearlstein's attention to anatomy, his even lighting, and his unsensuous surroundings seem to eliminate the erotic content associated with

the traditional female nude.

Courtesy of the Artist and Betty Cuningham Gallery. Photo: ©The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by Scala/Art Resource, NY

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Most of these works are highly valued—some as masterpieces—because they are powerful interpretations of their subject matter, not just presentations of the human body as erotic objects. Notice how different the interpretations are. Any important subject matter has many different facets. That is why shovels and soup cans have limited utility as subject matter. They have very few facets to offer for interpretation. The female nude, however, is almost limitless. The next artist interprets something about the female nude that had never been interpreted before, because the female nude seems to be inexhaustible as a subject matter, more so perhaps than the male nude.

More precisely, these works all have somewhat different subject matters. All are about the nude, but the painting by Giorgione is about the nude as idealized, as a goddess, as Venus. Now there is a great deal that all of us could say in trying to describe Giorgione's interpretation. We see not just a nude but an idealization that presents the nude as Venus, the goddess who the Romans felt best expressed the ideal of woman. She represents a form of beautiful perfection that humans can only strive toward. A description of the subject matter can help us perceive the content if we have missed it. In understanding what the form worked on—that is, the subject matter—our perceptive apparatus is better prepared to perceive the *[form-content](#)*, the work of art's structure and meaning.

The subject matter of Renoir's painting is the nude more as an earth

mother. In the *Venus de Milo*, the subject matter is the erotic ideal, the goddess of love. In the Duchamp, it is a mechanized dissection of the female form in action. In the Wesselmann, it is the nude as exploited. In the Velazquez, the nude is idealized; however, with Cupid holding the mirror for Venus to admire herself, we sense a bit of coyness, perhaps a touch of narcissism. This painting is the only surviving nude by Velazquez. Because the Spanish Inquisition was in power when he painted, it was dangerous to have and display this work in Spain. In 1813 it was purchased by an English aristocrat and taken to Rokeby Park. In all eight paintings by men, the subject matter is the female nude—but qualified in relation to what the artistic form focuses upon and makes lucid.

The two paintings by Suzanne Valadon and Alice Neel treat the female nude somewhat differently than those painted by men. Neel's painting emphasizes an aspect of femaleness that the men usually ignore—pregnancy. Her painting does not show the alluring female but the female who is beyond allure. Valadon's nude is more traditional, but a comparison with Renoir and Giorgione should demonstrate that she is far from their ideal.

PERCEPTION KEY Ten Female Nudes

1. Which of these nudes is most clearly idealized? What visual qualities contribute to that idealization?
2. Which of these nudes seem to be aware of being seen? How does their awareness affect your interpretation of the form of the nude?
3. *Nude Descending a Staircase* caused a great uproar when it was exhibited in New York in 1913. Do you feel it is still a controversial

painting? How does it interpret the female nude in comparison with the other paintings in this group? Could the nude be male? Why not? Suppose the title were *Male Descending* or *Body Descending*. Isn't the sense of human movement the essential subject matter?

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4. If you were not told that Suzanne Valadon and Alice Neel painted, would you have known they were painted by women? What are the principal differences in the treatment of the nude figure on the part of all these artists? Does their work surprise you?
5. Decide whether *Standing Woman* is the work of a male artist or a female artist. What criteria do you use in your decision?

EXPERIENCING Interpretations of the Female Nude

1. Is there an obvious difference between the representations of the female nude by male and female artists?
2. Does distortion of the human figure help distance the viewer from the subject?
3. To what extent does the represented figure become a potential sexual object?

Following are some suggestions for analysis.

First, working backward, we can see that the question of the figure being a sexual object is to a large extent parodied by Tom Wesselmann's *Study for Great American Nude*. The style and

approach to painting are couched in careful design, including familiar objects—the telephone, the rose, the perfume bottle, the sofa cushions, the partial portrait—all of which imply the boudoir and the commodification of women and sex. The figure's face is totally anonymous, implying that this is not a painting of a woman but of the idea of the modern American woman, with her nipple carefully exposed to accommodate advertising's breast fetish as a means of selling goods.

Even Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus*, a painting whose subject is more sensual than ideal, is less a sexual object than Wesselmann's. For one thing, her body is less revealed than Wesselmann's, and her face, shown to us in a mirror, is looking at her reflection, suggesting that she is in command of herself and is not to be taken lightly. The colors in the painting are sumptuous and sensuous—rich red fabrics, an inviting bed, and a delighted boy-god Cupid. Since Cupid is the archer who causes people to fall in love, could it be that some of the subject matter is Venus loving herself? What does the form of the painting reveal to you in terms of its content?

Then, the question of the distortion of the subject is powerfully handled by Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. This painting provoked a riot in 1913 because it seemed to be a contemptuous portrait of the nude at a time when the nude aesthetic was still academic in style. Duchamp was taunting the audience for art while also finding a modern technological representation of the nude on canvas that mimed the cinema of his time. Philip Pearlstein's study of two nudes moves toward a de-idealization of the nude. He asks us to look at the nudes without desire, yet with careful attention to form and color.

Finally, we may partly answer the question of whether women paint nude females differently by looking at Suzanne Valadon's and Alice Neel's paintings. Neel represents Margaret Evans in a manner emphasizing her womanness, not her sexual desirability. Hers is the only pregnant female figure—emphasizing the power of women to create life. Valadon's nude makes an effort to cover herself while looking at the viewer. She is relaxed yet apprehensive. There is no attempt at commodification of either of these figures, which means we must look at them very differently than the rest of the paintings represented here.

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Further Thoughts on Artistic Form

Artistic form is an organized structure, a design, but it is also a window opening on and focusing our world, helping us to perceive and understand what is important. This is the function of artistic form. The artist uses form as a means to understanding some subject matter, and in this process the subject matter exerts its own imperative. A subject matter has, as Edmund Husserl puts it, a "structure of determination," which to some significant degree is independent of the artist. Even when the ideas of the artist are the subject matter, they challenge and resist, forcing the artist to discover their significance by discarding irrelevancies.

Subject matter is friendly, for it assists interpretation, but subject matter is also hostile, for it resists interpretation. Otherwise, there would be no fundamental stimulus or challenge to the creativity of the artist. Only subject matter with interesting latent or uninterpreted values can challenge the artist, and the artist discovers these values

through form. If the maker of a work takes the line of least resistance by ignoring the challenge of the subject matter—pushing the subject matter around for entertaining or escapist effects instead of trying to uncover its significance—the maker functions as a decorator rather than an artist.

Whereas decorative form merely pleases, artistic form informs about subject matter embedded in values that to an overwhelming extent are produced independently of the artist. By revealing those values, the artist helps us understand ourselves and our world, provided we participate with the work and understand the way artistic form produces content. The artist reveals the content in the work—the content is revealed to us through the act of participation and close attention to artistic form.

Participation is a flowing experience. One thought, image, or sensation merges into another, and we don't know where we are going for certain, except that what we are feeling is moving and controlling the flow, and clock time is irrelevant.

Participation is often interrupted—someone moves in front of the painting, the telephone call breaks the reading of the poem, someone goes into a coughing fit at the concert—but as long as we keep coming back to the work as dominant over distraction, we have something of the wonder of participation.

Summary

A work of art is a form-content. An artistic form is a form-content. An artistic form is more than just an organization of the elements of an artistic medium, such as the lines and colors of painting. The artistic

form interprets or clarifies some subject matter. The subject matter, strictly speaking, is not in a work of art. When participating with a work of art, one can only imagine the subject matter, not perceive it. The subject matter is only suggested by the work of art. The interpretation of the subject matter is the content, or meaning, of the work of art. Content is embodied in the form. The content, unlike the subject matter, is in the work of art, fused with the form. We can separate content from form only by analysis. The ultimate justification of any analysis is whether it enriches our participation with that work, whether it helps that work "work" in us. Good analysis or criticism does just that. But, conversely, any analysis not based on participation is unlikely to be helpful. Participation is the only way to get into direct contact with the form-content, so any analysis that is not based upon a participative experience inevitably misses the work of art. Participation and good analysis, although necessarily occurring at different times, end up hand in hand.