

09/04/13

CRITICS PAGE

What Is Art?

by Noah Dillon

I have two jobs right now: one is as an assistant and archivist for a highly regarded Minimalist painter, the other is as a copywriter for an online art auction site. Each provides opportunities to examine how arguments for excluding or including art are constructed, from the 1960s through to the present. At the former, I see how populist rejections of Minimalism were crafted, while at the latter I'm obliged to draft content that draws any work on the website into the domain of art—significant, desirable, serious art.

As an archivist, I mostly see my boss's work received positively, but he's been generous enough with his critics to keep the negative reviews as well. Many of them come from regional newspapers where local institutions hosted traveling exhibitions or paid large amounts of money to collect monochromatic paintings, metal boxes, or rows of bricks. These writers typically rejected such works as dispiriting, hoaxes, dull-witted, or even imperialist—in any case, not true works of art but mute objects that could only be sold with bewitching rhetorical tricks. A lot of these claims were tinged with isolationism, suggesting that the work is foreign, imposed by a conspiracy of elites, and that it denigrates right-thinking people. They spoke from a reactionary, defensive position, certain that an imperious art establishment was scoffing at them.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those criticisms favored the mimetic and the Romantic in art. And they weren't shy about admitting parallels with previous traditionalist sentiments, with occasional statements to the effect of, "It's true that critics also saw [Cezanne, Picasso, Pollock, whoever] as a charlatan, but this is different and truly insidious." Sometimes readers wrote to the editor, thanking the author for confirming their biases, permitting them to skip seeing the suspect work in person.

Meanwhile, in my writing for the auction site, sketching short biographies of artists and

descriptions of their works for sale, it can feel like the prejudices that earlier artists contended with have since been relinquished, though I'm probably wrong. There, the field of art appears exceptionally level or inclusive—everything is presented as equally notable and deserving of consideration. That may not be a bad thing: artists of all kinds appear to have greater opportunities now than ever before and the art market has greatly expanded to allow for various strains of performance, painting, video, sculpture, printmaking, etc. But I often end up in a funk about my writing there, since the nascent ideas and efforts of emerging artists are treated on par with the technically and intellectually developed labor of older or apparently better ones, differentiated only by price. And this is where I get really exercised: the word “better” and other value judgments come creeping in. I hear myself erecting barriers I don't want. And I think a lot of this stems from our zeal in defining what art is, rather than taking seriously what it does and how.

The division between good and bad art or between art and non-art rests, for me, almost not at all in a work's intellectual sophistication or avant-garde novelty. I truly want to allow for art that is potentially unserious, conservative, unoriginal, dumb, or boring. I want a notion of art that extends from Duchamp, Beuys, and others—one that can broadly include many modes and many people. I want an art that isn't circumscribed by thinking about itself first as “art.”

To call something art is to establish certain expectations for its social value, its ability to give aesthetic pleasure, and its limits as a pragmatic, functional object or act. It is cordoned off from the everyday and placed on an exalted plane, is weighted with expectations that neuter one's unselfconscious relationship with a thing, a place, a situation. The provocateur and philosopher Henry Flynt objected to the label “art” as being tacitly oppressive and imperial, handing down mosaics of cultural legislation. Even as the definition of art is revised outwards, it only means that more stuff can convey ordered values. In both their poetics and their ethics, the best artworks transcend our proscribed ideas of what art is. They drop like bombs into our selves, exploding our relationship to other artworks and how we experience being human. They leave the place of art.

I don't get this experience very often. Little of the work I like and none of the work I make achieves this standard. That's OK. I don't doubt that those things purporting to be art are what they claim and it feels counterproductive to challenge their assertions on that point. I don't care whether they are included in a narrow space called "art," the definition of which only serves to contain and tame whatever radicality they possess. Rather, I care whether their existence not only informs but also re-orientes the way we understand. That's an art I want and I don't know that any definition gets you there.