

WHAT'S IN A PICTURE?

Musings on the content and making of art, particularly pictures

I wrote this essay in an attempt to become clearer in my own mind about what I think is valid in art

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I prefer pictures to have content. This is to say that I like a picture to communicate something more than just its own visual and physical attributes. Work that is wholly self-referential (often wrongly termed 'abstract', but see below) is often presented as being of a higher intellectual order, as being 'more difficult', than works having some degree of recognisable subject matter. In exploring why it is I think that art (but pictures especially) should have content I will also attempt to show why non- or self-referential art, far from presenting a greater intellectual challenge, actually presents very little by way of challenge at all.

My belief that pictures *should* have content and my being unhappy with purely self-referential pictures (pictures that are, or that are intended to be, entirely about themselves and which therefore refer to nothing outwith their own physical boundaries) raises two initial questions:

- 1 can a picture, in fact, be concerned with nothing other than itself? And
- 2 what is this 'self'?

At its simplest the making of a picture could consist of marking a surface, without having any regard to the characteristics of either the mark or the surface. *There would be no intention other than first to mark that surface and then to declare the result to be a picture.* It is the **intention** of such an action - the intention to make a mark - that is fundamental and which distinguishes it from the mere happening-upon of some previously marked surface and declaring such to be a picture.^{1,2}

Since, by definition, such a picture can itself have virtually no inherent intellectual interest³, any such interest that viewers did find would depend almost entirely on their own perceptions and terms of reference.

Picture-making at such a basic level demands of the artist only the means to make the mark followed by the exercise of a simple choice: whether to keep the result or throw it away. Few are satisfied with so slight a challenge, either technical or intellectual. Most artists would have rather more in the way of broad concerns. A painter, for instance, would consider:

- ¹ *Some surrealists were concerned with the making of pictures with the minimum of deliberate involvement - they termed it "decalcomania" - where the results were largely accidental. Even so, there was an element of intention and a deliberate choice of medium and method.*
- ² *e.g. Marcel Duchamp's signing of a urinal and declaring it to be a piece of sculpture.*
- ³ *This is not to deny, however, that it might afford some kind of visual delight - which is another aspect of the rewards available to viewers of pictures and which will be touched on again later.*

- the selection and nature of the mark-making medium;
- the selection and nature of the surface to be marked;
- the formal relationship between mark and surface with regard to extent, proportion, shape, scale, etc.;
- the qualities of the mark i.e. its tone, colour, texture, transparency or opacity;
- the technical demands of both medium and surface.

All of the above are the attributes of painting *qua* painting.

There are painters for whom nothing more matters. For them there are no external factors that further influence how a picture should be. Every picture simply describes itself. The communication is circular. What is a viewer to make of it? There are four possible reactions:

- 1 *I like it* which is unreasoned and totally instinctive. The viewer is expressing delight and is responding to a visual sensation.
- 2 *I don't like it* which is also unreasoned and totally instinctive. The visual sensation does not delight.
- 3 *I like it because ...* either the viewer picks on attributes they find visually appealing and attempts to articulate what it about that visual sensation that gratifies them; or else attempts to intellectualise their response by ascribing to the artist intentions which he may or may not have had but the attainment of which the viewer claims to recognise.
- 4 *I don't like it because ...* the converse of 3, above: either the viewer picks on attributes they find visually unappealing and attempts to articulate what it about that visual sensation that does not gratify them; or attempts to intellectualise their response by ascribing to the artist intentions which he may or may not have had but the unsuccessful attainment of which the viewer again claims to recognise.

So, while a non-representational ⁴ picture may evoke viewers' responses that derive from or depend upon more than was intended by the artist, it seems to me that such pictures are in themselves (a) intellectually very shallow and (b) only capable of any qualitative

⁴ *It is important to distinguish between non-representational and abstract painting. I prefer the term 'abstract' to be reserved for work where the artist consciously, deliberately, selectively and demonstrably abstracts (i.e. 'draws away from') from an initially recognisable representation of something, somewhere or someone. Given that, in making a picture, painters generally decide to emphasise some aspects of their subject and to play down or even omit others, most paintings are to some degree abstracted; it is where the handling of forms is also consciously simplified (drawn away from their originally greater complexity) that abstraction becomes more evident. The kind of non-representational work I have described earlier has no such genesis, either being quite arbitrary or else being determined in accordance with notions of visual balance or imbalance, pattern (symmetrical or otherwise) or geometry.*

assessment if external criteria are adduced - which can be a stimulating exercise but one which says more about the assessor than about the work being assessed⁵.

What, then, about pictures that are not wholly self-referential?

All of the compositional and technical considerations outlined earlier are, of course, still relevant. However, the way they are handled has a purpose that lies outwith the painting itself. There is an idea that, it is intended, should be conveyed to the viewer. The idea may be simple or it may be complex; there may be more than one idea. Typically, underlying ideas fall into one or more of the following categories:

- ◆ to record
- ◆ to interpret
- ◆ to illuminate
- ◆ to relate
- ◆ to evoke
- ◆ to suggest or propose
- ◆ to depict
- ◆ to explain
- ◆ to comment
- ◆ to explore - ideas, relationships, etc.

A picture may embody just one kind of idea or combine several. One, at least, will have been in the painter's mind, more or less clearly, from the outset; others may or may not follow as work progresses. Fundamentally, the painter has something to say or to point out ABOUT something that is exterior to the painting *per se*, something that lies beyond the mere assemblage and application of materials.

For the viewer there are thus not only the painting's surface attributes and composition to enjoy or remark upon; but also there is content, a kind of story (in the broadest possible interpretation of that word) that is being told more or less overtly, more or less recognisably and which is more or less susceptible to interpretation. There is meaning. There is directed interest - the painting points out something and so there is a message.

By contrast, self-referential pictures are in themselves meaning-less and, therefore, vacuous.

Messages, of course, can vary enormously in their transparency. Some can be very clear; some highly ambiguous; while many lie somewhere in between. A text message, for instance, might read *GET FISH*. On the face of it, that is a reasonably clear message. In a domestic context it implies that the recipient should acquire one or more (how many/ how much more?) fish - although there is nothing to say whether the fish in question should be: live or dead; from fresh water or sea; destined for the pan, pond or aquarium; or how or where the said fish should be got. In another context, though, the message might intend that the recipient either contacts someone called Fish or, perhaps, does something far worse to the unfortunate Fish. So, unless the context of the message is

⁵ This provides critics with fertile ground for imaginative interpretations.

already understood, it turns out to be anything but clear. And had the message just read *FISH*, the ambiguity would have increased further, implying not only most of the foregoing possibilities but also an instruction to go angling; or to seek some answers; or to contemplate the genera as a whole.

In a verbal message clarity is highly desirable if the sender's intentions are to be understood fully and acted upon. In pictures, however, clarity of message may not be so desirable. Overt messages equate with slogans or propaganda or signals. Once understood there is no reason to return to such a picture. "Message received, over and out" is the likely response. This would be to defeat what I would regard as painting's central objectives - to interest, detain and entertain. For this to happen there has to be something to engross the viewer. If what you see is all that you get there is nothing further to detain the spectator. Crucially, there is no requirement for the viewer's contribution, no need to ponder, reflect, disentangle or interpret. Where is the reward in that? If viewers are required to contribute nothing, involvement is by definition superficial - no more demanding than the contemplation of wallpaper.

There should always be something required of the viewer. The viewer has to make a contribution to any understanding of the picture. No pain, no gain. Nothing in, nothing out. (Clichés these may be, but they are apt.)

How can the painter be sure that that viewers get the intended message? Unless the work in question is at the level of a slogan, he cannot. Interpretation of a picture depends to some degree on what the viewer brings to it - which varies from one viewer to another. So, since they can't control how their pictures are understood, painters would be better to welcome the chance or, indeed, likelihood of different interpretations.

There are questions here about

- ◆ whether paintings can or do reveal the painter's subconscious mind; and
- ◆ the rôle of paintings in triggering the viewer's own subconscious.

Paintings can without doubt do both of these things and there is no need to debate or analyse these matters here. It is enough to acknowledge that where a painting has hidden depths; where it can suggest alternative interpretations; or be possessed of layers of meaning; or evoke a variety of intellectual responses: it is a more engaging and a more rewarding work.

And since paintings possess physical area (i.e. unlike sentences or most books, pictures are not linear in structure) they can encompass greater complexity, a fact that may be immediately apparent or else (given that, unlike sentences or most literature, pictures can be explored in numerous ways and at any pace) becomes clear as a result of contemplation and study.

A rewarding picture is one rich in possibilities. It is one to which a viewer will return.

A picture's self

At the start of this essay I asked

- 1 can a picture actually be concerned with nothing other than itself? And
- 2 what is this 'self'?

I have indicated that there are indeed picture-makers who, in their work, seek to eschew all extrinsic concerns, to avoid all content. I believe that, although such work possesses a physical 'self', its lack of anything beyond that by way of external reference renders it irredeemably shallow.

However, that is not the end of the matter. As a painter and a printmaker myself I know very well the extent to which the actions required to make a picture can, themselves, exercise control. The use of a particular technique may be a means to an end while, at the same time, be its own end. I may have elected to employ a particular printmaking technique, say, so as to achieve a form of visual communication I consider appropriate to the subject. But as I use that technique I cannot avoid being drawn into its technical possibilities and nuances, or to find and confront its technical demands. Such things then become, themselves, further objects of the picture-making exercise.

So, in making my picture, I must satisfy my desire to convey whatever it is about my subject that I wish to show while at the same time successfully explore the technical constraints and opportunities of my selected medium. Printmakers are particularly prone to this - which is not surprising, given that printmaking is so technique-driven. Printmakers spend much of their time figuring out how to achieve the effects they require in their own work - and how other printmakers achieve theirs - so much so that technical skill can come to outweigh visual interest. Conversely, there are painters and sculptors who make a fetish of doing things badly or, at least, have no regard for the exercise of skill. Why? Do they see technical skill as something unnecessary, outmoded or as signifying some kind of educational or social privilege? Do they feel that, by eschewing technical skill in their work they are mounting some kind of protest? Or are they lazy or just plain incompetent? Yet galleries show such stuff and people buy it, often paying dearly to be insulted⁶ in this way.

Mark-making pleasure

The making of marks can, of itself, be pleasurable. The actual physical action of making a mark, with its particular qualities of colour, texture, direction or thickness can please one's senses and one's mind. Perhaps it is the actual movement of the hand that endows the mark with a particular gestural quality; perhaps the hand's movement through time

⁶ *Some say that what is important in a work of art is "the idea" and that nothing else matters; that the conveying of ideas is the purpose of visual arts. And while there is no denying that a visual artwork can be used in this way it raises questions about (a) whether this is the best way to promote ideas; and (b) whether, where the idea is all and the traditional attributes of artworks are disregarded, one is left with something that can actually be termed an artwork at all. [Continues over page]*

and space arouses pleasures similar to those evoked by, say, dancing; or is it that, after years of practice, the artist can make marks with the utmost economy of movement that nevertheless suggest the most complex of ideas? Viewers cannot share such mark-making experiences directly but vicarious appreciation is possible.

Visual Sensation and Delight

If the appreciation of the artist's own pleasure in the making of marks *per se* is difficult for the viewer, far easier is the appreciation of a piece's physical qualities. The tactile qualities of a sculpture or the manner in which paint has been applied to a canvas can be every bit as rewarding as the sculpture's form or the painting's subject. It is as if the artwork has become solely an object: a source of purely sensory delight, having no intellectual or spiritual dimension. Where this is but one level of appreciation of a given artwork, I have no problem, for it enriches the experiencing of the work. But were the evocation of such responses to be an artist's principal purpose, their work would have to be judged shallow and having no more merit than an intellectual vibrator.

Look at Me

All artists are, to some degree exhibitionists. This does not just mean that they have exhibitions, though most do and all aspire to; but that we are by nature show-offs. We want others to see and, we hope, to enjoy what we do; we want others' approbation and appreciation too. We want some kind of reaction. The worst thing that can happen is that it is ignored⁷; that it fails to have any kind of impact; that what was intended to be shown, and the embodied skills, are all missed. We make art and then show it in the hope that both its content and its construction (in the broadest sense of that word) are understood and applauded. And if money changes hands, so much the better.

There are some, however, who, though exhibitionists, are not artists.

There are some who seek only monetary reward and will get it whatever way they can. They have no scruples about the ends they employ⁸.

6 continued....One of my main gripes about art-as-a-vehicle-for-ideas is that the ideas themselves are frequently so banal or slight that I doubt the effort was worth it. Is the impact so very much greater than (or even as great as) say the written word? Who does it reach? If there is to be no ambiguity the result can be little better (if at all) than a slogan. If there is ambiguity enough to cause the viewer to ponder, then fine - but you can't be sure that the message received is what you wanted to be understood. There would need to be some deliberation, which makes it at best a conversation piece. I said earlier that "A rewarding picture is one rich in possibilities ... one to which a viewer will return." But the rewards are not only in the content, but also in the evidence of artistic skill and in aesthetic effect - not just in the mind. I return to this theme towards the end of the essay.

⁷ As Oscar Wilde said, the only thing that is worse than being talked about is not being talked about.

⁸ Robert Harris writing in *The Guardian* on 13 September 2008 on the topic of "Damien Hirst's 'simple-minded' works exposes this attitude very clearly.

There are patrons and buyers who

- possess money but lack sense
- are visually illiterate, being unable to appreciate or are bored by the skills and perceptions that have traditionally informed artwork
- see themselves as an avant garde, challenging orthodoxy, setting out to shock or being in constant pursuit of whatever they see as 'new'
- are themselves exhibitionists.

Critics without experience

Critics must also accept some of the blame. Except where they themselves have acquired a degree of artistic skill, they are poorly placed to assess the executive merits of an artwork. Of course, there is often a wealth of reference (art historical, cross-cultural, social, etc.) they can bring to their criticism and this adds enormously to their interpretation - as they are all too often at pains to demonstrate. The context in which a professional critic views a particular work is likely to be very much wider than that of the amateur, insofar as subject, style and underlying ideas are concerned (allowing, of course, for the effects on interpretation of previous experience and personal circumstances; there can never be wholly objective criticism). Rare, though, is the critic whose personal experience incorporates sufficient practical experience of the application of any given art medium to be able to assess others' skills. Perhaps this accounts in part for the apparent acceptability in today's art world of the badly-executed. It is often claimed that it is not necessary to be able to play a trumpet to be able to tell when a trumpet is being played badly. This may be true, but the opposite is even more so: for a real trumpet-player is the one best placed to know when a trumpet is being played well. The increasing inclusion of amateurs and non-practitioners on assessment panels of all kinds certainly risks, and maybe ensures, a drop in standards.⁹

Ideas

It is often said that art, or a particular artwork, is "about ideas".

How good is art at conveying ideas? Can it really convey ideas at all? Strictly speaking, in the realms of visual art, it cannot. It is mute. Viewers may speculate about its meaning, its message, its underlying idea - which is part, at least, of the purpose of art - but they cannot know or deduce anything for certain. In itself, except at the most basic level of the slogan, an artwork can convey nothing; what you get from it has as much to do with what you bring to it as with what it presents to you.

Art interests the viewer in several ways and at different, overlapping, levels.

⁹ *Is there a parallel here with the notion that everyone should get prizes? No matter how badly you do, you will be rewarded - so why try? What is the point of running a race to win if the person who trails in last also gets a prize? Losing, therefore, is the same as succeeding and success can thus be attained very easily, with no effort - which, it appears to me, is a belief widely held. Who needs talent, or application? Let's acclaim those who lack it.*

Some may be categorised as conscious and/or intellectual:

- ★ recognition (the subject may be familiar)
- ★ technical appreciation (“that takes some doing!”)
- ★ commemoration (a portrait, say, may recall an event)
- ★ evocation (particular colours or textures may evoke a place or season)
- ★ intrigue (what’s all that about?)

Others stem from emotional reactions:

- ◆ sympathy for the subject
- ◆ empathy with the subject
- ◆ amusement
- ◆ horror/distaste

Since there are so many things that can influence viewers’ reactions to an artwork, art is clearly an unreliable vehicle for the accurate transmission of specific ideas.

A favourite recollection of mine is of a group of sculpture lecturers in a prominent Scottish art school, ca 1972, who were trying to evaluate a student’s work - a wholly formless jumble of sticks lying on the gallery floor. Wordlessly, but with much stroking of chins and tugging of beards, they circled the offering for a good ten minutes before their leader (briefly an enfant terrible in the world of Scottish sculpture) announced with enormous profundity

“It’s all about connections - or perhaps the lack of them.”

“Ah, yes. Indeed,” his companions all agreed and then solemnly and happily moved on to the next exhibit. No-one made any comments about aesthetics or technique.

Word-weaving

For many artists, word-weaving has become their most important skill - or so it would seem. It is no longer sufficient that an artwork should stand or fall by its intrinsic merits as an artwork (i.e. the skill with which it has been done) and upon its effects upon the viewer. Now artists feel the need to wrap their work in explicit narrative statements. A work may no longer speak for itself or require a degree of mute interlocution on the part of its viewer; instead an explanatory narrative is provided. Words are being used to say what the artwork is supposed to say. So why bother with the artwork? ¹⁰ Why go to the trouble of painting canvas, sculpting stone or etching copper if a hundred words from a ball-point pen or word-processing programme can, so much more easily, so much more quickly, say what has to be said?

It seems to me that two factors combine here: conceptualism and funding. Which comes first is difficult to say but they certainly appear interlocked.

¹⁰ *Critics have, of course, to use words when trying to convey something of a work, and of their responses to it, to others who have not experienced the work for themselves. But such words are the critic’s words, the critic’s interpretation.*

Much art, particularly of the larger kind, is only possible if large sums of money are made available. The individuals and bodies who have such sums to disburse need to know what it is they will be paying for; they require artists to state in advance the nature of their work. A form of words must be found to explain the intended work and, it is hoped, sell the idea. The supplicant artist therefore concocts a brief story to arrest and intrigue the jury - typically along the lines of “spatially-interlocking installations that confront the essential paradoxes inherent in C21 urban living”; or “site-specific light-boxes that invite cross-cultural social interaction with notions of a deity”. It is proposals such as these that attract funding bodies. Such fine words sound serious; they suggest intellectual exploration and boundaries being stretched. To be associated with such endeavours is flattering and the purse-holders flatter themselves that they actually know what any of it means. The embracing of such high-flown rhetoric will reflect well upon them: it shows that they are able to grapple with and comprehend difficult ideas. And it avoids the necessity of having to make aesthetic judgements on the basis of maquettes or preparatory drawings.

The writing of funding application proposals and conceptual art seem made for one another. After all, applicants for funding are being asked to describe their intentions, whatever it is they conceive doing. It is an invitation to weave with words: words which can describe the notional in ways that physical media cannot. The results are, literally, heady stuff; they are works of the imagination. And it is what appears imaginative that funding bodies usually look for. If it is imaginative it must be new in some way, pushing at the existing boundaries of art. This is what funders think they should be associated with, to be thereby hoisted into the forefront of contemporary art, espousers of modernity and new thinking.

But just because it is imaginative does not mean it is any good. The idea may have been interesting, but how is it manifested? Does the result - the artwork - fulfill the criteria normally associated with the medium chosen to evoke this work of imagination? Such criteria do not become irrelevant because the work is in some way concerned with ideas, for why else choose the medium of sculpture, painting or whatever? If only the idea is important: write it down; that's far more efficient and takes up far less time. But I do not think that it *is* only the idea that is important - not in art. It is not unimportant, but for an artwork to work as a piece of art, the idea needs to be one of several attributes that combine, the others all coming under the heading of 'aesthetic':

1. the work has, first and foremost, to appeal to one's senses, principally visual but also tactile and occasionally aural and olfactory;
2. it should demonstrate the creator's ability to handle the chosen medium;
3. it should stimulate intellectual response, consciously or unconsciously, and in so doing ...
4. be ideative.

That, for me, is the order in which the art should work.