

Student Name: Dawson Edwards

Student Number: 1905122

Programme of Study: BA Fine Art

Tutor: Paul Duerinckx

Module: ADAD5004 Research in Practice

Word count: 2406

Keywords: Spirit, Form and Beauty

To issue some context to what I am to discuss in this essay, I am to provide an exploration of three keywords relating to my practise, in which I will use a minimum of three artists/philosophers to explore different factors that I believe relevant to those keywords. The keywords that I find most appropriate for this essay are spirit, form, and beauty. To be specific, the exploration of beauty through art where form or spirit have been considered heavily. When considering beauty, I will not be discussing beauty by today's standards of what is considered 'pretty' in physical appearance but more a sense of beauty that attracts people towards art and my beliefs on what influences the allure of viewing it. Beauty transcribed through art can be felt through several different mediums and have been shown to affect people in different ways. For example, you can be moved by a piece of music, a painting, a sculpture, a performance, a piece of photography or even a film. To be moved by a piece of work is not only an emotional reaction but I believe to be a spiritual one as well. Through my work I encourage an in depth thought process of both form and spirit and attempt to incorporate that into my practise when considering sculpture and pottery, this is due to the performance aspect of making (spirit) and the outcome of said performance being left with a structure or object (form). My interest lies within the artist and the viewers perception and reaction to the making and the overall piece of artwork made. Is it the beauty that attracts us to certain artwork? Is it beauty that inspires us to make art?

The keywords are strongly associated with theories regarding my practise and their effect on the way I work as a fine artist. Linking these three keywords will lead to a question that will inform my independent research document.

Beauty as defined by Websters dictionary states it as "the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts

the mind or spirit” (Merriam-Webster, 1828). Our conceptions within art surround this notion of ‘beauty’ as something we, as artists, attempt to achieve through our artwork. Visual appeal and aesthetics have played a severe role in our culture and have in turn influenced our opinions and views on what we consider to be beautiful and appealing regarding art. George Dickie, a professor of philosophy with a specialty in aesthetics and art philosophy, states that a piece of artwork is defined as “an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public” (Dickie, 1997). I agree to an extent with such a statement. While I believe artwork has an innate attraction towards those of the artworld, art should not be made specifically for that subsection of the population. ‘Art’ is everywhere, not just in museums and galleries. As a society we incorporate art, craft, and design into everything; the buildings we live in, the things we buy and use every day from phones to pencils. Design and Craft do rely heavily on a level of physical appeal and usefulness as we are surrounded by these things constantly, which is why ‘art’, more specifically ‘Fine Art’ differs from design and craft as it is no longer focusing on physical appeal, but emotional and psychological appeal.

A factor that is hard to ignore is that art began as a symbiotic relationship to function. Functional objects used in everyday life were adorned with patterns and symbols, often as a sign of gratitude towards deities or to depict religious events to tell stories over centuries. Art made in this manner reflected the culture of the time, similarly, while art continues to reflect culture and belief today, art has evolved to no longer need a level of function and can stand alone simply as something to make us think. As suggested by Ben Tilghman, a professor of Art History, “to call something a work of art is to suggest it is worth contemplation” (Tilghman, 1999). Beauty as defined by western cultures have always had an aesthetic appeal. I believe this is due to when

art being made during the renaissance era, where mathematics and science were being explored simultaneously, art became a way of depicting the world one to one, using depth scale and perspective to demonstrate human relation to the perceivable world. Due to the level of mathematics and measurement made in artwork to depict scenes we have created a culture where symmetry and precise spatial relations between objects and figures have conditioned us to believe that those are the parameters of what is to be considered beautiful. I can draw this conclusion from evaluating art made from eastern cultures where beauty and art are considered very differently. Eastern forms of art have demonstrated a care of the emotional impact of an art piece over the physical appearance. Dynamic and over emphasising structure demonstrates the relationship to nature, the divine and the political, with art pieces being symbolic in many cases. To be more specific there are two types of Chinese painting, one of which (Gongbi, Figure 1) is a style of painting rich in colour with depictions of portraiture and narrative to be continued over centuries of storytelling while the other (Xieyi, Figure 2) translated meaning 'free hand' where a form more exaggerated allowed the painter to explore more expressive ways of demonstrating emotion which were found mainly when depicting landscapes. This style of art differs greatly from western interpretations simply for its lack of true physical representation, and a focus on mind, spirit, and relation of self to the world as a form of self-care.

Impressionist artists were heavily inspired by eastern forms art, mainly Japanese art – Ukiyo-e. Ukiyo-e art is a mass-produced wood block print. Initially in black and white but overtime was further developed into up to 30 different colours, Japanese writers described Ukiyo-e art as a representation of the attitudes of the. The prints usually depicted scenes of pleasure, such as scenery, courtesans, and kabuki actors. The prints weren't supposed to portray real life but instead an artist viewpoint

without an overuse of detail. When the Japanese opened their borders after a long isolation from the western world a flood of imports entered European markets exposing these new philosophies and ideas on art and artists practises. This form of art making inspired impressionist painters because it reaffirmed that they were able to portray everyday life or scenery without worrying about detail and accuracy but simply for the beauty in the painting itself. Ukiyo-e art inspired artists to focus on subject alone without the unnecessary complications of background. Artists like, Édouard Manet, Pierre Bonnard, Gustav Caillebotte, Mary Cassatt, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Gauguin. One of the main lovers of wood block printing was Monet, having an extensive collection of them in his house in Giverny. In addition to having a strong effect on his painting Monet also, when designing his garden, incorporated a Japanese style bridge over his water lily pond.

Claude Monet is one of the artists that really fascinates me especially with his approach to his work. Monet slowly developed cataracts throughout his life, leading colours to change in hue and creating a blur over his vision. Whites would become yellow, greens would become yellowish green, reds would become oranges, blues and purples become reds and yellows. Monet, discussing his vision, stated “my bad sight means that I see everything through a mist - Even so it is beautiful and that is what I'd like to show”. At this moment in time, specially for Monet, art no longer became about recreating on a canvas what was seen in the physical world (Figure 3), it now became about what he saw from his own perspective and that beauty he wanted to share (Figure 4). Aligning with the Japanese style of simplicity that had inspired him.

Regarding spirit, a strong advocate for spiritual existence in art was Wassily Kandinsky. Kandinsky was a Russian painter and art theorist with a strong

association to the abstract and expressionist art movements in western culture.

Kandinsky theorises that art has an “internal necessity” (Kandinsky, 1960).

Kandinsky explores the idea that artists have a ‘spiritual impulse’ to make art and audiences have a ‘spiritual hunger’ to admire art. Considering art as a spiritual antidote to the overwhelming value of materialism that arose during Kandinsky’s art period. Introducing the idea of ‘stimmung’, translated from German to English meaning mood, artists tend to follow a Tolstoy definition often meaning ‘Infectiousness’. Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy was a very influential Russian writer and, in his book, ‘What is Art?’ states “In order correctly to define art, it is necessary, first of all, to cease to consider it as a means to pleasure and to consider it as one of the conditions of human life.” (Tolstoy, 1899). Tolstoy clearly states art is made for pleasure but wants to remove this notion and have us introduce art as a necessity, similar to Kandinsky, who echoed his ideas. This idea of ‘infectiousness’ is theorised to be what separates ‘good art’ from ‘art’. According to Tolstoy there are three conditions relating to what makes us feel for art: Individuality of feeling, clearness of feeling and sincerity of that feeling. Individuality, when strong enough can have a strong effect on an audience which encourages a bond between viewer and artist. Clearness allows a sense of individuality to clearly be felt by the viewer. However, sincerity shows the most important. According to Tolstoy “the degree of infectiousness of art increased by the degree of sincerity in the artist” (Tolstoy, 1899) meaning that when an artist truly feels for their work and isn’t doing it for any other reason but for themselves to express an inner need, the viewer can sense the degree of sincerity and with that is compelled to issue a sincere response. So, is it sincerity that attracts us to different mediums of art regardless of physical appeal? Is that the beauty that artists and audience look for? Kandinsky theorises “In each

picture is a whole lifetime imprisoned, a whole lifetime of fears, doubts, hopes, and joys. Whither is this lifetime tending? What is the message of the competent artist? ... To harmonize the whole is the task of art" (Kandinsky, 1960) showing that sincerity is a spiritual need as he goes on to say 'art for art's sake' is neglectful of the true nature of art. As I write, perhaps it is not beauty that I am fascinated by, perhaps it is the sincerity from the artist that compels a level of comfort in the viewer which in turn encourages a sincere response from the audience. When considering beauty, it often evokes good feelings and draws us in with them. Beauty is considered to be pleasurable to the senses, but sincerity does not claim either good or bad feelings and thus casts a wider net that draws people in whether they experience a positive reaction or a negative reaction.

Sincerity does offer more in terms of creating a response as there are those that no longer believe that art is inherently beautiful. For example, art critic JJ Charlesworth believes "After all the horrors of the last century, and the continued horrors of this one, who could still believe in the value and goodness of the beautiful?" (JJ, 2016). Charlesworth believes that because of instances of aggression hatred and distrust within human history (The World Wars, the Holocaust, racism, sexism etc) it is impossible to truly appreciate beauty within art because art has always reflected humanity and its capabilities. His argument is hard to dispute, after such distressing events in the last century it is difficult to see humanity as inherently good due to the suffering that is caused and, in some cases, still being caused by humans. It then becomes easier and easier to relate humans/humanity as something notoriously 'bad'. After the first world war, the dada movement reacted to the violence. The movement rejected ideas like logic, reason and aestheticism and embraced a more nonsensical form of work that focused on ideals of protest. The term anti-art was a

precursor to the Dada movement, put together by Marcel Duchamp around 1913 with works that challenge what were known as accepted traditional definitions of art. Dadaist works often considered ideas like chance and humour, both challenged traditional art as work made in this time had been incredibly structured, requiring much planning, scaling, and measuring before executing carefully. It is from this point I believe that art shifted from ideals of beauty and perhaps artists began to concentrate on an underlying feeling of sincerity. If we are to agree with Dr Charlesworth it is after the first world war that we as people started viewing ourselves as inherently bad or as Dr Charlesworth deems us “out-of-control monsters” (JJ, 2016) and that would explain the transformation from pieces of artwork that would cause feeling of comfort to artwork that responds to stimulus using non-traditional, visually less stimulating pieces of art that often had more depth and meaning.

In this proposal I have explored an idea of beauty within art and how spirit and form influence our attraction towards art in general. When writing my dissertation, I want to explore in further detail what attracts audiences and artists alike to art and whether those reasons have changed over the years art has been developed. This idea of beauty that I have been exploring is vast in depth and I have only been able to explore a surface level of that, I would also like to explore this topic further as I believe that the reason ‘why’ we are attracted to art comes hand in hand with the deeper beauty that we feel when viewing it. Moving forward, I want to continue experimenting with Tolstoy’s theories on Individuality, Clearness and Sincerity. Through my research I have found interest in artists theories on why we need art as a large number see art as a necessity rather than an option. Tolstoy and Kandinsky

have offered a suggestion on how art is infectious, and I will continue to explore these notions.

In a contemporary art world does sincerity distinguish between good and bad art and does beauty still play a role? What draws people to art, audiences and artists alike?



Figure 1

Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Bibliography

Dickie, G., 1997. *The Art Circle*. New York: Haven, 1984: Chicago Specrum Press.

JJ, C., 2016. *Tate Etc.* [Online]

Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-36-spring-2016/does-beauty-still-matter-art>
[Accessed 3 June 2022].

Kandinsky, W., 1960. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. s.l.:Peter Smith Publishing.

Merriam-Webster, 1828. "Beauty". *Merriam-Webster.com*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beauty>
[Accessed 8 May 2022].

Tilghman, B., 1999. A Review of A. Goldman's Aesthetic Value. *Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, p. 81.

Tolstoy, L., 1899. *What is art?*. London: Walter Scott Ltd.