

# NOWHERE – NOW, HERE!

## HOW ART TEACHES US TO UNDERSTAND THE OTHER AND DEAL WITH COMPLEXITY IN MODERN LIFE

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The [European-Identity Cultural Caravan](#) (EICC) is another example of an emerging trend: How new audiences (primarily businesses) are looking towards art. All over the globe business schools have a growing awareness of art and aesthetics. In his book 'The Rise of the Creative Class' (2002) the economist Richard Florida even gives all the hard arguments for promoting and supporting art in society, that any politician could need.

But when talking about art in an interdisciplinary context, such as the EICC, several problematic things can be observed:

### 1

Firstly, people spend an enormous amount of time trying to agree on what art is. Everyone has experiences with art and thus some sort of definition, be it articulate or not. There is a general tendency to think that one's personal definition is the most precise.

Coming from the humanities, as I do (where art has been defined accurately within disciplines such as Art history), a discussion like this can be interesting – or exhausting. All too often it leads to nothing concrete and people end up being upset, because their taste in and understanding of art has been threatened. Art, it seems, is always linked to something deeply personal, and there is even a tendency to a know-it-all attitude: If I can see it, hear it or feel it – I can understand it!

### 2

Secondly, the growing focus on individuality and creativity in society has brought forth an impractical democratisation of art, making art everybody's business. Since there is no 'art police', everything can be art: From patchwork and cooking to leadership and building a business - and everything in between. Instead of calling something 'artful', 'art-like' or simply 'creative', the preferred designation is 'art'.

Also, a blurring of the creative and art-like genres and disciplines is taking place (which is not just linked to a growing interdisciplinary awareness within the arts). Instead of talking about theatre, classical music, dancing and the like, people (both performers and audiences) tend to lump them all together and call everything 'art'.

Of course, there are obvious affinities, but how can we even begin to look at and talk about these similarities if we have neglected the tradition and history of these disciplines? These trends are unfortunate because it waters down the concept of true art and prey on its domain. From both a linguistic, historical and semiotic standpoint, this blurring of terms should not be the way to go.

### 3

Thirdly, since businesses today desperately depend on innovation and creativity to increase growth, and the distinction between working hours and leisure time has been dissolved in Western society, the businesses are looking towards art for inspiration and solutions: How to innovate and how to increase value in the work-life – through and with art.

Between the artists and the businesses there is often a great lack of both common ground, language and goals. Businesses tend to look for immediate applicable tools and only rarely appreciate that dealing with and understanding art calls for both time and reflection, which are often hard to come by in modern workplaces. On their part, artists are often motivated by abstract, ideological and unrealistic visions that are difficult to convey into a concrete, practical and realistic business context.

Interactions between the two can in ideal situations – such as a defined field of collaboration where a ‘translation unit’ is present (for instance researchers or practitioners of arts- and-business) – be fruitful, despite these groups’ differences in language and goals – or maybe even because of them. At other times no real dialogue or exchange takes place, and stereotypical prejudices are maintained with renewed vigour.

### What is Art – And Why Should You Care?

So, what is art? This, of course, is the 1,000,000 Euro question, but I choose to answer it with another man’s words<sup>1</sup>, for the sake of the argument setting aside the problems of putting complex briefly. ‘Art’ is:

1. A general term describing a set of objects presented as part of a narrative known as art history. This narrative draws up the critical genealogy and discusses the issues raised by these objects, by way of three sub- sets: painting, sculpture, architecture.
2. Nowadays, the word ‘art’ seems to be no more than a semantic leftover of this narrative, whose more accurate definition would read as follows: Art is an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects.

The reason why I like this short definition is that it shows that art is no longer just objects of shape and colour by so- called geniuses presented in a ‘white cube’ (a gallery or museum). Art today is made of diverse actions, whereby art itself is seeking to engage new audience. By dealing with it – talking about it in a meaningful way, e.g. using the terms of art history – art becomes simply a discourse among other discourses.



‘The Battle of Orgreave’ by Jeremy Deller [found at [www.artangel.org.uk](http://www.artangel.org.uk)]

One example of an art project that works as a discourse could be artist Jeremy Deller’s ‘The Battle of Orgreave’ from 2001. It is an artistic re- enactment of a violent clash between thousands of miners and police officers, at a strike caused by Thatcher’s closing of the British mines in the 1984. With 800 actors and several veterans from the original confrontation, a TV station, the art consultancy Artangel, and the director Mike Figgis (‘Leaving Las Vegas’), Deller made it all happen again.

A work of art like this isn’t static; it isn’t confined to clinical white walls. It reaches us in the streets, our newspapers and televisions: In short, it makes us talk about it, because it is there; right in our faces and not to be ignored.

<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud: Relational Aesthetics (2002) – glossary: <http://www.gairspace.org.uk/htm/bourr.htm>

This conversation is essential, because it is central to the meaning of art, in past times as well as today. When looking at a physical object before one's eyes, it is a fact that we can only look at it from one perspective at a time. By turning it in our hand or walking around it, we can see it from multiple perspectives and constitute this object as three-dimensional. We can also ask someone with a better view what's on the other side and thereby broaden our perspective. The same thing goes for abstract objects, like thoughts, concepts or ideologies: Everything is always seen from a perspective, and via talking and imagination this perspective is widened.

This applies for an artwork as well, be it a painting or a happening such as Deller's. For the untrained eye, ear and mind, art can be e.g. 'pretty', 'ugly' or 'stupid'. This is a one-dimensional and subjective perspective that too often leads to nothing or to people staying content with art that is 'pretty', such as Monet's water lilies that are reproduced in thousands and thousands of copies all over the world.

As such, there is nothing wrong with a singular art perspective like this. But as long as there is much to be gained, and I truly believe that there is, one should never stay satisfied with a perspective on art that rules out everything not pretty.

So, considering for a moment a given artwork as a 'conversation piece' – something to talk about – what happens when people start discussing it? The answer is quite simple: You see new perspectives. Some on which you disagree, but also others you didn't see yourself before. This way you learn from your peer, not only from her viewpoint, but also more about the artwork at hand that you never thought of before. These insights can lead to new discoveries in an artwork, discoveries that minutes before were closed to your eyes and mind. You may even see beauty in what before was 'ugly'<sup>2</sup>.

### Going Nowhere Leads Everywhere!

In his book 'The View from Nowhere' (1986) the American philosopher Thomas Nagel talks about objectivity as a desired, constant progression for the individual and, on the collective level, a goal for mankind. He lists two steps in becoming more objective:

1. "The step of conceiving the world as a place that includes the person I am within it, as just another of its contents – conceiving myself from the outside, in other words. So I can step away from the unconsidered perspective of the particular person I thought I was."
2. "The step of conceiving from outside all the points of view and experiences of that person and others of his species, and considering the world as a place in which these phenomena are produced by interaction between these beings and other things."

Total objectivity is, of course, impossible, as our intellects always will be embedded in a limited setting (the body), but higher degrees of objectivity should still be an ideal to strive for, as it is also at the basis of good things as morality and democracy. Total objectivity is what Nagel calls 'The View from Nowhere'.

Returning to what was said about art as a conversation piece and art as a discourse, the role of art becomes apparent. By engaging in a conversation about art you not only learn of other perspectives, you also learn that your perspective is just one in midst of many others.

Nagel: "To understand that there are other people in the world as well, one must be able to conceive of experiences of which one is not the subject: experiences that are not present to oneself.[...]"

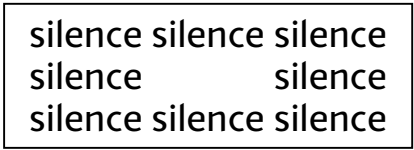
We must understand that "the world is not our world".

Works of art can be this bridge that momentarily closes the gap between two minds by sharing experiences of art. Of course, a conversation piece does not have to be a work of art in order for someone to become more objective. Every day we talk and interact in similar

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<sup>2</sup> As said above, talking about art often leads to nothing. But in a controlled environment, such as a classroom with a knowledgeable teacher, everyone can learn to talk about art, regardless of age and background.

ways with no use of art at all. So, what's so special about art? First of all, art is something that is not something else – it has unique value and meaning in itself. An example:



Text-ideogram by Eugen Gomringer (1925-)

What do you see? Most people will see words, which are normally parts of a text. Then they will maybe try to understand what this text is saying and after a few seconds write it off as a poor text with no message.

Try blurring your sight. Instead of words you see shapes... The text becomes a figure, resembling a mouth, slightly open as if whispering. On one hand it could say 'schhh ...' which would correspond with the words. But the very action of making a noise with the mouth is the complete opposite of silence. So it becomes dynamic, ambiguous and enigmatic.

Only art can give us rare insights like this<sup>3</sup>. Great artworks carry their own universal method of understanding that can be applied to almost everything else once understood. And with great immediate payoff. This way of learning from art, teaches us how to deal with complexity and change in everyday life and how to see connections across normally separated disciplines and fragments.

### On the Road to Nowhere: Steps Forward

Art is not just a gift for the gifted to open. It is for everyone to enjoy and learn from. Only we need to recognise, that

- art is art – and not something else
- art takes time, sweat, toil and tears and is well worth the effort in itself
- art has a history and tradition that should not be neglected in the pursuit of immediate and superficial 'truth' and inspiration
- art is not just a tool, but once fully understood it can also be applied as such
- talking about art isn't easy and to do so we need a common language, which should be found within Art history

For every person – no matter what age, background, or taste she has – there is always another artwork waiting out there. Waiting to help her take another step forward on the path to Nowhere. The first steps can be hard, the next even harder, but at every corner she can look back at the distance covered and see improvement. This is all the return that is really needed.

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**Learning Lab Denmark** ([www.lld.dk](http://www.lld.dk)) is doing research on the interplay between art and business in the consortium The Creative Alliance. Please refer to:

[www.lld.dk/artfulcreation](http://www.lld.dk/artfulcreation)

- about 'Learning Tales of Arts-in-Business' by Lotte Darsø (will be published in June 2004)

[www.lld.dk/orgart](http://www.lld.dk/orgart)

- about 'Organisational Art' by Martin Ferro-Thomsen (to be published in the beginning of 2005)

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<sup>3</sup> I have not touched upon aesthetics, which also is something very essential for art. Often it is an aesthetic parameter, a color or shape, which initially draws us to the artwork.