

Gold

Sarri Nironen, Finland

III.

Picasso's Cubist paintings, Philip Glass's eccentric music, Duchamp's famous statue of a toilet seat – although considered art now, all have been criticized of being ugly, too left-field or simply unsuitable to bear the 'art-tag'. Moreover, pop music, mainstream movies and television shows have long been criticized for not providing any real depth and solely existing for entertainment purposes, therefore, again, not being art at all. When answering this question I understand art meaning all its forms possible – music, visual arts, literature, not limiting myself to one branch only and thus trying to answer as comprehensively and holistically as possible.

The question of whether an ugly piece of art can be called art is as long-lasting as art itself, and is difficult to answer precisely because we haven't defined the words with which we try to discuss the topic. First I will try to define the terms with which I will try to answer the question: can a work of art be ugly, and – and this, perhaps, is the most difficult part -- if so, why should we take interest in it?

PART A: BEAUTY AND ITS PLACE IN ART WORLD

The definition of beauty has changed during the course of time, although some notable similarities exist at all times. A historical viewpoint is needed, particularly in order to understand that the definitions of art and beauty vary from time to time.

In Ancient Greece, what was symmetrical was considered beautiful. A person, particularly a woman or a young man, was beautiful if his features were symmetrical; both sides of the face were similar and there were no notable faults to this accordance. Art, in its form if not content (for it is important to note that Greek tragedies were full of horror and cruelty, people going against Gods and ending up in tragedy), was supposed to follow the same pattern. For example, in the field of literature / theatre this aim at symmetry was summarized in Aristotle's view on theatre: a theatre piece should have a beginning, middle and an ending. Thus the beginning should have a worthy ending and everything should be in order and in its right place. The view was behaviourist: the clue to the characters minds' was in their actions. Of some importance is also the term 'catharsis', which theatre was supposed to have: where the audience is left with a satisfied feeling, a feeling of something soiled being finally cleansed, a hero put through dark times coming out golden, untouched, his morals intact through and through. There was a definite line of defining art through the *audience's* eyes – as opposed to treating art as a purpose in itself. Art's form had a purpose, and that purpose was pleasure, and art's content had a purpose, and that purpose was teaching morals.

In medieval times, this view was painted more vividly and colorfully as Thomas Aquinas continued on the theme of beauty: beauty was now harmony and clarity, and in medieval Europe art was made to serve the church and was made to commemorate God. Art, in particular visual arts, still was defined through the audience, the people. Where it once had been made for pleasure it now served as a tool for teaching people, mostly illiterate, about God. What remained was the understanding that art had the power to move the viewer in a profound level. During this time, from mid-Medieval art to renaissance to baroque to rococo to neo-classicism, the focus was shifted from God back to

symmetrical form, and although the ideal form was defined and re-defined from dark and heavy to pretty and conscientious, there still was a definite ideal -- until the 19th century.

In 19th and 20th century, the understanding of beauty and of art changed drastically. Where once there had been clear definitions for the form as to what can be considered art, now the demarcation was more difficult. Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy wrote about the human psyche and political undercurrents, Proust, Joyce and Woolf focused on the inner workings of the mind with their stream-of-consciousness technique, Picasso, Monet and Van Gogh changed the visual arts completely, from showing pictures to showing emotions, and there were risks taken in the musical world as well, form changing from tonal to atonal music, choosing to put the rules on the shelf for a while. All this was done before the Second World War, and, indeed, the reason for these changes can be found in the political climate. With the rise of democracy in the 19th century and the line between a servant and a ruler now blurred, the artist was now free to pursue his own self through art: he was now free to define art for himself. He was now an *artist*: someone who strives and dies for his art. Artists were outsiders of the society, they were observers and commentators (rather like a Greek choir, if you like). As the individual was freer and the political climate during the World Wars was messier it had an effect on art and a lot of art focuses on the existential despair of an individual. It is no wonder either that existential philosophy was born during this time. As for the form, in modern art there was no definite pattern, rather, patterns and rules were made to be broken (which, of course, makes it a rule in itself). With the rise of the individual and Freud's psycho analysis, art also was able to show ugly sides of someone whose behavior was beautiful, thus blurring the line between beautiful and ugly. James Joyce stated in his first novel *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* that beauty means brokenness: it has to have a quality that breaks the harmony, and, consequently, the viewer's heart.

From what we can now conclude is this: there has been a tendency to define art through its purpose, and where at first the purpose was in its effect on the audience – whether causing them pleasure or making them understand God – now it seems that art has a purpose in itself, and art defines itself. Curiously enough, nowadays it seems that art with a clear dogmatic purpose is considered unworthy, whether it be causing pure pleasure or teaching black/white about something. However, what is perhaps most important to note from the course of history is that the meaning of both art and beauty has changed, thus in part justifying a relativistic view, where nothing can be said for certain.

PART B – UGLINESS AND ITS PLACE IN ART WORLD

St. Augustine defined evil as a lack of goodness, and taking this route, I suppose we can define ugliness as a lack of beauty in a painting for example. However, as beauty in itself was so hard to define, it is probable that this definition of ugly is null-and-void to begin with. Moreover, bearing in mind the Joycean definition of beauty – brokenness – it is difficult to pinpoint 'ugliness', because if beauty is brokenness, what room does that leave for ugliness?

The dictionary gives a synonym for 'ugly' – 'bad-looking', ie. something that is not pleasing for the eye. In real world this might just as well be the case. You see a person not fit in your beauty standards and you might think them ugly – you see a house in the middle of renovation and that's not beautiful either – etc. etc. There is no point in arguing about whether or not ugliness exists – it is difficult to define objectively but we all definitely know what pleases us and what doesn't. I'm taking a concept realistic view here.

In 20th century Duchamp, a modern artist, put a lavatory in a museum and called it art. In their own

home, no one would call a lavatory beautiful, but in museum, it suddenly was. Did the lavatory change from ugly to beautiful by changing the context or did it stay ugly? Can something that is ugly be ugly when it exists in a beautiful context? And, if not yes, what purpose can it possibly serve – why change a beautiful context into an ugly one when there is a whole world filled with ugliness should one need some?

Goethe was once quoted as saying 'Art and Life are different. That is why one is called Art and one is called Life.' Although simply put, I think this quote holds heavy meaning. In context of art, one doesn't need practical knowledge. When seeing a lavatory, it serves the sole purpose of *being there* and for *being looked at*. It doesn't need another dimension; one doesn't need to use their common sense to work it. It exists in a world of its own. Even if one goes to a modern art museum where one can *do* something with the statues, one still doesn't do it to further any other purpose than art itself. With art, one experiences it, but is still left strangely cold. The objective-subjective –dichotomy exists: the object, piece of art, lures the viewer, who thinks he does all the work by watching, analyzing and understanding, when in reality the object is the one that captures and manipulates. They both stay passive.

The Heideggerian thought of *In-der-Welt-sein*, of being a part of the world wholly and not being reduced to being a subject whose only dimension is its subjectivity seems to be nullified here, but that isn't the case at all – I'd rather define art as a safe haven when one is in need of a place where he can *feel* and dare to feel sympathy without constraint. One of these things he can feel and see and experience is ugliness – either his own faulty ways of thinking or the ugliness of the piece of art. Therefore the ugliness in an art piece is justified because one cannot watch and analyse it freely in the real world – one needs the context of art to observe ugliness objectively.

Therefore I come to the conclusion that yes, there can indeed be things that are ugly in the field of art, and yes, art itself can be ugly without it losing any of its ugliness by changing the context. Next I will try to explain why we should take interest in this ugliness.

PART C – WHY SHOULD WE TAKE INTEREST IN UGLINESS?

Yes, indeed – why should we?

There have been different ways of defining art in the field of aesthetics – art defined by context, where something that is in a museum or respected in the art community is art; art by the form: something that pleases us in one way or another; artist's view, if a painter (who paints pictures) paints his home walls he can decide whether or not they are a part of his oeuvre; the meaning, if it says something real and true then it is art – but these definitions do not help us when trying to argue successfully for the case of ugliness in art. Indeed, why on earth should we take interest? Why can't we just watch quaint comedy theatre and listen to Mozart all day long?

One answer would be that ugly things happen in life and if we are informed then we know and hopefully can do something about it. Morrissey's lyrics about handicapped persons might not have been necessarily pretty but they had an impact on youth who might otherwise have been ignorant about it. Knowing about different ways of life makes one understand life better, which, in turn, makes one more knowledgeable and understanding. This helps the community as well as the individual. This argument is universal whereas the second appeals to the individual.

There is a term called 'sublime' in art world. It is an adjective that can loosely be translated as

'other-worldliness' or 'supreme beauty' – a piece of art that moves us so profoundly that it takes us to another, better world. I think that sublime transcends the terms 'beautiful' and 'ugly' and therefore something that is ugly can be sublime and life-changing. This experience is something that is similar to William James's theory of truth where he investigated the pure experiential way of understanding truth in the field of religion. Ugly pieces of art or ugly art (because some even argue that commercial things, such as pop music, are ugly – which is of course silly, as many classical composers put on a pedestal today were just mere craftsmen in their time) can be a way to experience something truly magical, as they are often so open in their ugliness and in their vulnerability. It is hard to love something that is perfect; a flawed object gives room for empathy and sympathy.

We should take interest in ugliness because that way the ugliness lifts itself into another level. The ugly becomes beautiful when in contact with an audience who sees it so. Seeing ugliness in art can be a form of escapism from the ugly of the world. The reason here is purely egoistical but also sincere and honest: because taking interest in art – ugly or beautiful – can result in transforming the viewer as well. And what could be more appealing than that? If life is egoistical desire, as Schopenhauer argued, then surely it is good to channel this desire somewhere where it doesn't hurt.

Perhaps this is what Ludwig Wittgenstein meant when he cryptically wrote that "Ethics = Aesthetics". They are both subjects that despite our analyzing, criticizing and problem-solving, we cannot say anything about them. Words fail us when used to try to understand transcendental things: goodness, art, death. Continuing the Wittgensteinian view, "There is nothing that can be said about art that is better than staying silent"; we can try to define ugliness, then why it can exist in art, then why we should take interest in it, but in the end, there is nothing that when said can even vaguely resemble the subject it tries to talk about. The reason one should take interest in ugly art is in its possible impact on a person in the purest level, but if one does take interest, he does it for and by himself and not when forced from outside – as personally he defines the things, ugliness and beauty, that he takes interest in.