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The lamentable consequences of blurring the boundaries

ABSTRACT

For your purposes as an art educator, how do you define 'art' and 'artist'? Some critics argue that, in today's art world, the 'institutional' definition of art reigns. What other definitions of art seem credible and useful to you as an art educator?

The notion of 'blurring the boundaries' pervades the contemporary artworld. Virtually every prior distinction – from that between the fine and decorative arts, or crafts, to that between art and life itself – has been rejected. In critical discourse, the phrase is invariably applied approvingly, as if it represented a cultural advance. Louis Torres and I (Torres and Kamhi 2000) have long argued otherwise, however. In our view, the breakdown of distinctions has resulted in total incoherence – both in artistic practice and in writing and thinking about art, and hence in art education (Kamhi 2020b).

KENNETH LANSING'S PRUDENT CAVEAT

To my knowledge, the only prominent art educator who has argued against this breakdown is Kenneth M. Lansing (1971). He has rightly insisted that art 'can and must be defined if we are to make any sense of what we do

KEYWORDS

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in the classroom' (Lansing 2004: para. 7). Otherwise, '[w]ho is to say what students must know and be able to do in art' (para. 4)? Without a definition, he argued, an art teacher is comparable to an aeronautical engineering instructor who does not know what an aeroplane is. He rejected the prevailing claim that art, by its very nature, cannot be defined. And he offered the following definition, based on generally accepted 'paradigmatic examples': 'Visual art is the skillful presentation of concepts and/or emotions (ideas and feelings) in a form that is structurally (compositionally) satisfying and coherent' (para. 7).

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Paradigmatic examples of the visual fine arts have traditionally consisted of skilfully wrought imagery in two or three dimensions (loosely termed *painting* and *sculpture*), dealing with things of human significance (Barasch 1985: xi–xii). Why imagery? Because it is the most direct and effective way to convey ideas in purely visual terms.

Moreover, the fine arts were conceptually distinguished from the decorative arts (Seckelson 2008). Contrary to feminist claims, that distinction was not due to arbitrary 'privileging' by a male-dominated artworld. It was grounded in functional differences discernible not only in western antiquity but in traditional cultures the world over (Halliwell 2002: 7–8; Kamhi 2014: 23–32). As clearly identified in the eighteenth century, the distinction is this: the fine arts serve a purely psychological function (*Cambridge Dictionary* 2021), while the decorative arts and crafts are aesthetically enhanced objects that serve a primarily physical function; they combine 'pleasure and utility' (Batteux [1746] 2015: 3).

The invention of abstract painting and sculpture in the early twentieth century gravely subverted the seminal conception of fine art as essentially mimetic. By mid-century, with the artworld ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism, philosophers concluded that art could no longer be defined. In so doing, however, they glossed over crucial facts about abstract art and its practitioners. Both the pioneers of abstraction and their successors deeply feared that in the absence of imagery their work would be seen as merely 'decorative', and not meaningful (Kandinsky [1911] 1977: 47; Blotkamp 1995: 80, 113, 204; Auther 2004), as indeed it is by most viewers (Torres and Kamhi 2000: 163–68). From the beginning, abstract artists tried to compensate with words to convey their intended meaning (Kamhi 2020a: 131).

Cognitive science clearly indicates why abstract art is fundamentally unintelligible. The basic units of cognition are not isolated lines, colours and shapes but, rather, integrated percepts of real-world entities (Edelman 2004: 35–36). While regarded by some as a sign of cultural progress and sophistication, abstract art intended as anything more than merely 'decorative' is, in effect, retrograde from a neurological perspective (Sacks 1990: 17).

The artworld ascendancy of so dubious an art genre provoked an equally dubious reaction in the endless inventions of postmodernism. From 'pop art' to 'installations' and 'conceptual art', these anti-art forms predominate in the contemporary artworld and gain increasing attention in art education, despite the public's largely negative response to them (Millán 2016; Torres and Kamhi 2004). Like abstract work, they too require reams of verbiage to convey their intended meaning. In contrast, remember when a picture was 'worth a thousand words'?

ART EDUCATION CONSEQUENCES OF NOT DEFINING ART

In Lansing's view (2004), the failure to identify the essential nature of art has greatly debased studio work, by reducing the teaching of technical fundamentals in studio courses. Since the reigning 'institutional' theory accepts virtually anything as art, how can one say what skills are needed? Tellingly, a visual arts skill-based interest group has recently been formed in the National Art Education Association. Is it not ironic that a special focus group is needed for what should be a central purpose of the organization?

The open-ended view of art has also led to increasingly meaningless verbiage in art education. Lansing pithily observed: 'Trying to make sense of written and oral presentations in our profession is like swimming in a sea of molasses' (2004: addendum). He also asked, quite provocatively: 'Is it possible that some people are not really teaching art, although they purport to be doing so?' (2004: Addendum) My answer is a resounding Yes!

To restore the teaching of *art* to *art* education would entail understanding why the work of artists such as Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White and Augusta Savage, for example, stands head and shoulders above that of contemporary artworld stars like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Chris Ofili, Michael Ray Charles, Alma Thomas or Kerry James Marshall. That would be a salutary beginning.

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