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The Confines of Art: Opinion or Definition?

As individuals who share an innate curiosity for knowledge and attaining it, we find ourselves constantly discovering new findings along the way and assigning meaning or value to them. This form of classification may rely on key features or traits in which can define function based upon form or even describe how it may interact with its environment or vice versa. Although this style of classification is most known for its biological applications such as the three domain theory or the five kingdoms of life, we find that classification manifests itself in many different cultures and concepts. Though all of these classifications are accepted as factually true and generally do not have any controversy or disputations since they are based upon observable physical characteristics, when attempting to apply this technique to less definitive elements such as art, our clearly defined line becomes blurred. This occurs because these topics can have myriad dissidence due to subjective claims and opinions. This is evident within the popular abstract question “What is art?” as we can define anything created by humans to be art, but after that cannot prove or disprove another’s belief as it would be entirely opinion at most points. We can only group art into certain categories based upon its usage and meaning as well as the process and medium upon which it is created. This leads to distinctions such as utilitarian art which serves a well-defined purpose while remaining aesthetically pleasing and fine art which is created solely for enjoyment and to evoke feeling.

Art, although present within many aspects of society and also utilized for many different functions, ultimately has no universally accepted definition. This is due to its highly subjective nature and openness to interpretation in which one individual may receive a different feeling or association with the art in question. We primarily rely upon beauty and aesthetic appeal to qualify certain pieces as art, but where does this become definite? Should we only include hand crafted elements as art, or also allow mass produced pieces which contain no effort to obtain a perfect recreation? This topic is posed by Linnaeus’ statement from Philosophia Botanica (1751), “In natural science the principles of truth ought to be confirmed by observation”. If classification is indeed confirmed by observation, who is to say that one may not find paved roads to be beautiful and define it as art? Or even the opposite, to denounce art such as “White painting” by Robert Rauschenberg as an unimaginative farce, thus incapable of being art. Rauschenberg’s painting does not follow the broad definition of created by humans as it does not rely on any sort of creation or development, but is simply a modification of a pre-existing element; the color of the canvas. Given these issues with definition, Rauschenberg’s painting is nonetheless popular and has exemplified the idea that art should have one true focus and categorization; the emotion which is evoked from an audience. This is highlighted through composer John Cage’s commentary, “the white paintings were airports for the lights, shadows and particles” also noting that they “caught whatever fell on them.” Although Rauschenberg’s painting serves no true utility, it represents the influence that fine art has as it evokes a feel of awe and wonder as we contemplate what this painting could portray, how the artist was influenced to make it as well as its impact on the community.

With careful observation, we can generally categorize art by the medium on which it is created as well as the genre and subsection in which it would correspond. This method, although generally accepted as viable, may cause issues as there may be countless ways to combine certain genres and have art which does not clearly fit a single genre. This can lead to the acceptance of stereotypical art culture such as painting, drawing, photography, film, sculpture, in which does not leave room for deviations in their definitions of art. This general acceptance of few categories of art is defined within John Berger’s ways of seeing as he states “It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it” (Berger 7). Being innately curious, we try to learn how certain things are created and further established and try to use that information to define the rest of our world. If we are unable to understand the how these things have come into being, it becomes easy to lose interest and question its relevance. Take for example the subject math in which many do not even consider to have any artistic potential since it is a cold and calculated subject with strict rules which must be followed. Although math is overlooked within the realm of art, it does contain many qualities which can be associated with art. Math is in fact beautiful since it can only possess truth and can be a metaphor on life as when we face any problem, we must first take a moment to analyze the problem, gather any resources or prior knowledge which is applicable, and also take numerous steps to reach a single solution.

Figure

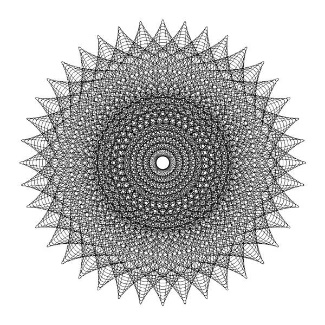


Figure 1: “Ellipse Lace”. This complex and intricate design is created very simply from just one element—the ellipse. "It is my intention to use the computer as a tool to generate designs that are not only aesthetically pleasing, but that also reveal the order, structure and beauty inherent in mathematical objects. Additionally, if an attractive design can be made from the simplest of elements, then the generating process itself becomes an object of beauty as well. Complexity from a simple beginning via an elemental algorithm is a common, fascinating and universal process." Source: Susan McBurney, Western Springs, IL

Figure

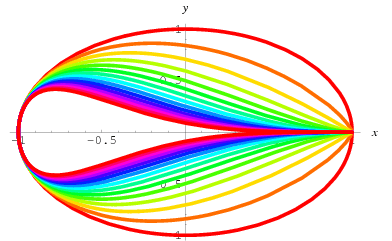


Figure : “Teardrop Curve”. This design is a plane curve by the given parametric **equations** **x= cos (t)** and **y =sin (t).** By graphing the two equations and combining them, this piece can be created.

As shown within Figure and Figure 2, math expressions can be plotted and graphed to create works of art such as these prismatic spirographs. In both cases, the viewer’s interpretation of the art depends on his/her experience with math and can have a profound effect on their focus. Berger displays this principle through his statement “Yet, although every Image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing” (Berger 10). This is illustrated through the different behaviors each person might have. Take for example an individual whom does not have much experience with math, that individual would not put more thought into the creation of this piece or try to discern meaning from it. In contrast, an individual who does have experience with advanced mathematics may think more critically and pose certain questions based upon observations. They will be able to see myriad ways to change each image by only altering a small value within the equations to produce an entirely new image. Take for example an equation such as Euler’s Identity: This is regarded as the most beautiful equation of all as it contains each exact mathematical principle and foundations such as addition, multiplication, and exponentiation, 0, 1, π, e, and i which are arguably the most important values in all of mathematics. By combining all of these values into a single equation, we are essentially crafting our own masterpiece in which can obtain the title of art.

Within our studies, most individuals take an objective stance on all subjects and take key notes on the intricate differences, but often fail to do so with art as it encompasses large fields which are not easily classified. Due to its highly subjective nature and great emphasis on personal interpretation, we often must keep the definition of art broad (created by humans) as no one style or medium has greater call to the title. Complications can arise with definition as when we follow stereotypical beliefs on what truly constitutes art, whom can participate in this area, and its real life applications, we are essentially boxing away a large area of the artistic world due to the available context. We have taken note of key examples of art within mathematics as it remains a beautiful area in which only encompasses truth and reason and can allow one to be creative in their own uses for this field. Most of us do not make any connections with art and mathematics due to preconceived notions of rational art such as paintings or sculptures, and do not adapt an understanding of how art comes into being. Take for example highly regarded tools of the trade such as Photoshop, After Effects, Maya 3D software and other popular rendering programs. Each depends on mathematic formulas in order to create special shapes and vectors to create our shade, lighting, boundaries, colors, and thus our artwork. If we were to break down these elements, we would see that with basic functions, we can create beautiful works of art through this different culture. With this in mind, you can argue that math, through its foundational principles and definite values, is an art form. This exemplifies the concept that our perception of what art can and cannot be is based solely upon our experience and what emotions are evoked from viewing that artwork. Self-interpretation; the most large hindrance to an efficient/complete classification of art remains ironically the greatest utility of contemporary art.

Works Cited

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