

Art Is My Answer

After reflecting on Janis Ian's song "Hair of Spun Gold" which she wrote when she was 12 years old, I looked back to my early works to track the idea of truth in art. I began saving songs after reaching age 15 and creating a journal at the urging of an art teacher at my high school. I would have saved ones from before then if I had liked them well enough, but I consider the first song I ever wrote to be "Friends Forever," written when I was 15, and included on my CD "Too Close On Purpose." In "Friends Forever" and other songs from that time period, there is a theme of longing for love, recognition and validation as a person/artist with deep feelings who found a place for them in music, if nowhere else.

It is a universal human need to love and be loved, to receive acknowledgment, to connect with others, and to find other like-minded people, such as in the story of the Ugly Duckling¹ which Janis Ian references in her Grammy-winning song "At Seventeen." There are certainly many reasons to create all kinds of art, great and small, but the kernel of truth that motivates art—or rather, that motivates *my* art—is the desire to share emotional reality with others and genuinely connect. Even in works intended to show disconnection, my art's purpose is still to share that experience in a way that resonates with other people.

In law they use a Latin term, "*res ipsa loquitur*," which means "the thing speaks for itself." While so much of the experience of art is subjective, I would still say that art is a thing that speaks for itself. How people respond to a work of art emotionally is evidence of its effectiveness in conveying its truth, or lack thereof. If it is performance art, then when it is performed, the performer also expresses the truth of the art, and adds her or his own resonance to it.

There is an art form that is specifically created to fool the viewing audience called "*trompe l'oeil*." In viewing some of this art, I still find there to be what I would call "truth" in the quality of the work in that a successful piece draws the viewer in, causing them to first experience the art as if it is what it purports to be. At the link below are examples of *trompe l'oeil*. One is a painting made on a flat surface that depicts--and actually appears to be--a three-dimensional painting on an easel:

http://www.stephenepriec.com/Trompe_I_Oeil.html

¹ From Wikipedia, the Ugly Duckling "...is a literary fairy tale by Danish poet and author Hans Christian Andersen (1805 – 1875)... It tells of a homely little bird born in a barnyard who suffers abuse from the others around him until, much to his delight (and to the surprise of others), he matures into a beautiful swan, the most beautiful bird of all. The story is beloved around the world as a tale about personal transformation for the better. The tale is completely Andersen's invention and owes no debt to fairy tales or folklore."

Trompe l'oeil demonstrates that craft and skill are important to a successful work of art in order for it to convey its truth. In this context, the “truth” in the art is in how well-crafted it is, that it can cause the audience to suspend disbelief and think the art *is* what it is depicting. *Trompe l'oeil* then, is a kind of play or joke on the ability of art to convey “truth.”

I align myself with Aristotle, who believed that humans learn through imitation and that art with its mimetic properties is a force for good. But the “fooling” of the audience by art is why Plato considered art dangerous, saying it confused people. I believe that it was Plato who confused people by claiming that philosophy was anything other than another form of art through which people could be affected and manipulated.

Because art does affect and can potentially manipulate human emotions, I would not say “Art is truth.” According to Merriam-Webster, art is simply defined as, “something that is created with imagination and skill and that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings.” I like this definition of art, and it encompasses both philosophy and *trompe l'oeil*.

In doing some basic research on Plato’s ideas, I came across an essay called “Plato: The Serpent in the Garden of Sexuality” by Marc Brustman, which contains the following excerpt:

“In the Republic, the Laws, and his other works, Plato sought to devise a system of education that would promote what he considered to be the qualities of an ideal man: wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage. Sexuality was fundamentally dangerous and antithetical to his project, so he said, because it was characterized by mental frenzy as opposed to rationality (Republic 403) and because sexual acts failed to teach courage to one partner (the passive) and temperance to the other (the active) (Laws 836). The only justification for sexuality to exist at all was for procreation. Therefore, all sexuality outside of marriage should be forbidden by law (Laws 838-9). If only that were possible! he laments (Laws 835). Getting everyone to agree to this moral code would be difficult, but once it was established it would perpetuate itself, if only all people could somehow be prevented from ever contradicting or denying it (Laws 838). He offers various potential means for establishing the acceptance of such a moral code, including telling children at an impressionable age that non-marital sex is hated by God (Laws 838), that abstinence from sex represents a victory even more glorious than any athletic or military victory, and that failure to be abstinent is ugly and makes you lower than the animals (Laws 840). He also suggests requiring that people hide their sexual practice, so that the sight of some people enjoying sex would not become an enticement to

others (Laws 841). Finally, one could simply enact a law forbidding all homosexual sex and all sex outside of marriage or concubinage (Laws 841).

This is Western sexual morality in a nutshell. It should not be surprising that it was first formulated by Plato, since he is undoubtedly the most significant thinker in Western intellectual history. I say it should not be surprising, and yet it is, because we have all been taught (as Plato suggested we should be) that these ideas come from religion and are ordained by God.”

If Brustman is correct that the origin of current Western religious and social belief systems is the philosophy of Plato, then Plato’s ideas have proven far more dangerous than art because people came to believe them to the point of not questioning them, and holding others to the “standards” set by those ideas, which have been incorporated into laws the world over.

Once again, I compare our world to that of the bonobo chimpanzees (our nearest animal relatives) who do not make art or music. *Res ipsa loquitur* -- their society speaks for itself. They have no war, no murder, no tolerance for rape (the females form groups to prevent or retaliate against male perpetrators), no child abuse; no systems that cause harm to their species. Is the absence of art and music in bonobo society due to the fact that their sexuality is openly expressed, that they do not divide it into hetero (good) and homo (bad), that there is no exclusivity about sex and sexual partners and no nuclear family, that they live to meet their basic needs and enjoy the pleasures of their emotions, their bodies and their world without money concerns?

I believe that art (including music) is how we humans allow ourselves to have and enjoy life’s sensual pleasures in a world fashioned according to Plato’s ideals and in which money is the primary focus. I even changed my major to Interdisciplinary Studies (from Composition for Film, TV & Games) so that I might one day attempt through research to prove the truth of my belief that we give ourselves free reign in art because we do not do so in life. However, I think this may not be able to be proven no matter how much research could be done. Also, if it is true, it doesn’t need me to prove it, and letting go of needing to prove it has given me the freedom to just be the artist I am. I do not need to, nor can I, solve the world’s problems by attempting to prove through research something I already instinctively know to be true.

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