

VitalSource Bookshelf: Humanities through the Arts

Chapter 14

IS IT ART OR SOMETHING LIKE IT?

Art and Artlike

In [Chapter 2](#), we argued that a work of art is a form-content. The form of a work of art is more than just an organization of media. Artistic form clarifies, gives us insight into some subject matter (something important in our world). A work of art is revelatory of values.

Conversely, an [artlike](#) work is not revelatory. It has form but lacks a form-content. But what is revelatory to one person might not be to another. What is revelatory to one culture might not be to another. As time passes, a work that was originally not understood as art may become art for both critics and the public—cave paintings, for example.

It is highly unlikely that the cave painters and their society thought of their works as art. If one argues that art is entirely in the eye of the beholder, then it is useless to try to distinguish art from the artlike. But we do not agree that art is *entirely* in the eye of the beholder. And we think it is of paramount importance to be able to distinguish art from the artlike. To fail to do so leaves us in chaotic confusion, without any standards.

It is surely important to keep the boundaries between art and the

artlike flexible, and the artlike should not be blindly disparaged. Undoubtedly, there are many artlike works—much propaganda, [*pornography*](#), and shock art, for example—that

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may deserve condemnation. But to denigrate the artlike in order to praise art is critical snobbery. For the most part, the artlike plays a very civilizing role, as does, for instance, the often marvelous beauty of crafts. To be unaware, however, of the differences between art and the artlike or to be confused about them weakens our perceptive abilities. This is especially true in our time, for we are inundated with myriad works that are labeled art, often on no better grounds than that the maker says so.

Concepts (beliefs) govern percepts to some extent. Confused concepts lead to confused perceptions. The fundamental and common feature that is shared by art and the artlike is the crafting—the skilled structuring of some medium. The fundamental feature that separates art from the artlike is the revelatory power of that crafting, the form-content, the clarification of some subject matter. But we may disagree about whether a particular work has revelatory power. The borderline between art and the artlike can be very tenuous. In any case, our judgments should always be understood as debatable.

We shall classify and briefly describe some of the basic types of the artlike. We will use examples mainly from the visual field, not only because that field usually cannot be shut out but also because that field seems to be the most saturated with what appears to be art. Our classifications will not be exhaustive, for the various manifestations of

the artlike, especially in recent years, appear endless. Nor will our classifications be exclusive, for many kinds of the artlike mix with others. For example, folk art may be decoration and usually is a popular art.

We shall briefly analyze five fundamental types of works that often are on or near the boundary of art: illustration, decoration, idea art, performance art, and virtual art (see the chart "General Guidelines for Types of 'Artlike' Creations"). This schema omits, especially with respect to the avant-garde, other types and many species. However, our schema provides a reasonable semblance of organization to a very broad and confusing range of phenomena that rarely has been

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addressed. The schema, furthermore, highlights the most important issues. The division between the traditional and the avant-garde points up the powerful shift in the "new art" trends beginning with Dada during World War I. The avant-garde seems to exist in every art tradition, but never has it been so radicalized as in our time. That is one reason the art of our time is so extraordinarily interesting from a theoretical perspective. We flock to exhibitions and hear, "What is going on here? This is art? You've got to be kidding!" Those who are conservative in approaching the avant-garde should remember this caution by the late Jean Dubuffet, the painter-sculptor: "The characteristic property of an inventive art is that it bears no resemblance to art as it is generally recognized and in consequence . . . does not seem like art at all."

Avant-garde works can be revelatory—they can be art, of course. But they do it in different ways from traditional art, as is indicated by the

listing under “Differences” on the chart. The key: Does the work give us insight? This typology is one way of classifying works that are not revelatory, but that does not mean they cannot have useful and distinctive functions. The basic function of decoration, for example, is the enhancement of something else, making it more interesting and pleasing. The basic function of idea art is to make us think about art. Every work should be judged by its unique merits. We should be in a much better position now than before the study of this text to make distinctions, however tentative, between art and the artlike. It can be a fascinating and illuminating study.

CONCEPTION KEY Theories

Our theory of art as revelatory, as giving insight into values, may appear to be mired in a tradition that cannot account for the amazing developments of the avant-garde. Is the theory inadequate? As you proceed with this chapter, ask yourself whether the distinction between art and artlike is valid. How about useful? If not, what theory would you propose? Or would you be inclined to dismiss theories altogether?

Illustration

Realism

An *illustration* is almost always realistic; that is, the images closely resemble some object or event. Because of this sharing of realistic features, the following are grouped under “Illustration” in the chart: folk art, popular art, propaganda, and kitsch.

The structure of an illustration portrays, presents, or depicts some

object or event as the subject matter. We have no difficulty recognizing that wax figures in a museum are meant to represent famous people. But do realistic portrayals give us something more than presentation? Some significant interpretation? If we are correct in thinking not, then the forms of these wax figures only present their subject matter. They do not interpret their subject matter, which is to say they lack content or artistic meaning. Such forms—providing their portrayals are realistic—produce illustration. They are not artistic forms. They are not form-content.

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PERCEPTION KEY *Woman with a Purse*

Is Figure 14-1 a photograph of a real woman? An illustration? A work of art?

FIGURE 14-1

Duane Hanson, *Woman with a Purse*. 1974. This is one of a group of life-size, totally realistic fiberglass “counterfeits” of real people. They represent a sculptural trompe l’oeil that blurs the line between art and life.

Art: ©Estate of Duane Hanson/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: ©AKG London

The following experience happened to one of the authors:

On entering a large room in the basement gallery of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, Germany, I noticed a woman standing by a large pillar staring at an abstract painting by Frank Stella. She seemed to be having an exceptionally intense participative experience with the Stella. After a few participative experiences of my own with the Stella and some other paintings in that room, I was amazed to find the lady still entranced. My curiosity was aroused. Summoning

courage, I moved very close to find that the “woman” was in fact a sculpture—the *trompe l’oeil* was almost unbelievable, becoming recognizable only within a few feet. Very few visitors in that gallery made my amusing discovery. And when they did, they too were amazed and amused, but no one’s attention was held on this lady very long. Any concentrated attention was given to the technical details of the figure. Was the hair real? Were those real fingernails? We decided they were. The form of the sculpture seemed to be less than artistic, apparently revealing nothing about women or anything else, except for exceptional craftsmanship. The late Duane Hanson’s *Woman with a Purse* is so extraordinarily realistic that it is a “substitute,” a duplicate of the real thing. Is *Woman with a Purse* an example of art or the artlike? We will return to this question later in this chapter.

Folk Art

There is no universally accepted definition of [folk art](#). Most experts agree, however, that folk art is outside fine art or what we simply have been calling art. Unfortunately, the experts offer little agreement about why.

Folk artists usually are both self-taught and trained to some extent in a nonprofessional tradition. Although not trained by “fine artists,” folk artists sometimes are directly influenced by the fine-art tradition, as in the case of Henri Rousseau, who was entranced by the works of Picasso. Folk art is never aristocratic or dictated by the fashions of the artistic establishment, and it is rarely fostered by patrons. Folk art is an expression of the folkways of the “plain society,” the average person. Folk art generally is commonsensical, direct, naive, and earthy. The craft or skill that produces these things is often of the highest order.

The snapshot aesthetic of photography is, in a sense, folk art because even before Kodak's Brownie Camera was introduced in 1900 people had been taking photographs without any training about composition or balance and content. The snapshot is an unmeditated "instant" image valued usually as a record of a person or a place and not as a work of art. Richard Estes's *Baby Doll Lounge* (Figure 14-2) is not a photograph. This very large oil painting may be a copy of a photograph that, if we saw it, we would consider a snapshot. It shows a simple street scene with a car close to its center, but without the Baby Doll Lounge, which, according to the title, is the subject of the original photo. Estes is not a folk painter. He is highly skilled and well trained. The photograph is an accurate rendering of the snapshot (therefore also the scene). Is this painting art or artlike?

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FIGURE 14-2

Richard Estes, *Baby Doll Lounge*. 1978. Oil on canvas, 3 × 5 feet. Estes, who painted in oils, created a style that emulated photography but tried to outdo it.

©Richard Estes, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York. Photo: ©Christie's Images Ltd - Artothek

Henri Rousseau painted seriously from age forty-nine, when he retired on a small pension from the customs house to paint full time. He studied paintings in French museums and made every effort to paint in the most realistic style of the day. He was sometimes the butt of ironic comments that overpraised his work, but instead of taking offense, he seems to have accepted such comments as sincere. Picasso gave a dinner in his honor in 1908, two years before Rousseau died, and some commentators feel Picasso may have been mildly ironic in his praise. Rousseau painted animals he had seen only in zoos or in dioramas in natural history museums, and sometimes he painted animals together

that could never have shared the same space. His sense of perspective was lacking throughout his career, and his approach to painting was marked by odd habits, such as painting all one color first, then bringing in the next color, and so on. However, his lack of skill came at a time in art history when [Surrealism](#) was under way, and his particular unrealities began to seem symbolic and significant in ways that a realistic painting, such as Estes's *Baby Doll Lounge*, could not. This is especially true of *The Sleeping Gypsy* (Figure 14-3), which improbably places a strange-looking lion next to a gypsy whose position is so uncertain as to suggest that he or she may roll out of the painting. Rousseau's intention was to make the painting totally realistic, but the result is more schematic and suggestive than realistic.

PERCEPTION KEY Richard Estes and Henry Rousseau

1. Which painting exhibits more skill? Is it skill that determines which of these paintings is more artlike?
2. How important is accuracy of representation to deciding whether a painting is art?
3. Which painting is more useful as an illustration?

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FIGURE 14-3

Henri Rousseau, *The Sleeping Gypsy*. 1897. Oil on canvas, 51 × 79 inches. Rousseau was a customs agent during the day but a painter in his free time. Although without training in art, he became one of the most original figures in modern art.

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4. Does translating a snapshot into an oil painting make a work of

art? Does the painting make the snapshot a work of art? How does this painting affect your valuation of photography as an art form?

5. What does *Baby Doll Lounge* reveal as a painting that it would not reveal as a photograph?
6. In each painting, decide what the subject matter is. Then decide whether the form transforms the subject matter and creates content. Which painting has more-interesting content? Why?

Popular Art

Popular art—a very imprecise category—encompasses contemporary works enjoyed by the masses. The masses love Norman Rockwell, dismiss Mondrian, and are puzzled by Picasso. In music Shostakovich and John Cage sometimes mystify the general public. But lovers of Beethoven string quartets often find it difficult to love heavy metal rock bands and rap music. The reverse is true, as well. The distinction between fine art and popular art does not always hold people back from enjoying both, but it seems to be rare.

The term “Pop” derives from Richard Hamilton’s painting *Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different so appealing?* (1956), of a nude muscle-builder holding a gigantic lollypop in a cluttered living room with a nude woman on a sofa wearing a lampshade for a hat. In the 1960s and 1970s, Pop Art was at the edge of the avant-garde, startling to the masses. But as usually happens, time makes the avant-garde less controversial, and in this case the style quickly became popular. The realistic showings of mundane objects were easily comprehended. Here was an

FIGURE 14-4

Andy Warhol, 200 Campbell's Soup Cans. 1962. Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 100 inches. The leader of the Pop Art movement, Warhol became famous for signing cans of Campbell's soup and fabricating individual cans of Campbell's soup. For a time, the soup can became an identifier of Pop Art.

©2017 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: ©The Andy Warhol Foundation Inc./Trademarks, Campbell Soup Company

art people could understand without snobbish critics. We see the tomato soup cans in supermarkets. Andy Warhol helps us look at them as objects worthy of notice (Figure 14-4), especially their blatant repetitive colors, shapes, stacking, and simplicity. For the masses, we have an art that seems to be revelatory.

PERCEPTION KEY Pop Art

1. Is Warhol's painting revelatory? If so, about what?
2. Go back to the discussion of Duane Hanson's work. If you decide that the Warhol work is art, then can you make a convincing argument that *Woman with a Purse* helps us really see ordinary people and thus also is a work of art? These are controversial questions.

PERCEPTION KEY Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want*

Next to Andrew Wyeth, Rockwell is probably the most popular and beloved American painter. A very modest man, Rockwell always insisted that he was only an illustrator. He frequently worked from photographs. Does the folksy piety appear sentimental in *Freedom from Want* (Figure 14-5)? Is the scene superficial? Does the scene stir

your imagination? Does the painting make any demand on you? Enhance your sensitivity to anything? Enlarge your experience? Is *Freedom from Want* art or illustration? Despite his popularity, Rockwell is almost universally described as an illustrator by the experts. They claim that his works are composed of pictorial clichés. Do you agree? Who anoints the experts?

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FIGURE 14-5

Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want*. 1943. Oil on canvas, 45¾ × 35½ inches. An iconic representation of the American family during World War II, this image was parodied in the film *American Gangster*, with Denzel Washington at the head of the table.

From the Collection of The Norman Rockwell Museum at Stockbridge, Norman Rockwell Art Collection Trust. Printed by permission of the Norman Rockwell Family Agency. ©1943 the Norman Rockwell Family Entities

Professional work can be much more realistic than folk art. Professional technical training usually is a prerequisite for achieving the goal of very accurate representation, as anyone who has tried pictorial imitation can attest. Professionals who are realists are better at representation than folk painters, as Richard Estes's *Baby Doll Lounge* demonstrates. Realistic painting done by professionals is one of the most popular kinds of painting, for it requires little or no training or effort to enjoy. Often, very realistic paintings are illustrations, examples of the artlike. Sometimes, however, realistic painters not only imitate objects and events but also interpret what they imitate, crossing the line from illustration to art.

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PERCEPTION KEY Estes and Rockwell

1. Does the sharp-focus realism (known as “photo-realism” because it is based on photography) of *Baby Doll Lounge* make it an illustration?
2. Note the reflections in the store windows. Do we ever see reflections quite like that? If not, then can one reasonably argue that by means of such transformation Estes heightens our awareness of such “things as they are” in the cityscape?
3. Do you think that Norman Rockwell worked from a photograph to paint *Freedom from Want*? Is cutting off the heads on each side of the painting typical of photographs of scenes such as this? How impressive is Rockwell’s artistic technique? Does his technique make this a work of art?
4. In terms of realism, how realistic is this portrait of a family sitting down to a happy Thanksgiving Day meal? Is it possible that this is more of a fantasy than a reality? Is it possible that this painting might serve as propaganda for family values? How would that affect its value as a work of art?
5. Compare Richard Estes’s *Baby Doll Lounge* with Norman Rockwell’s *Freedom from Want*. Which seems more representative of the world in which you live? Which transforms its subject matter more? Which has a richer content?

Baby Doll Lounge, in our opinion, is a work of art. Estes worked from a series of photographs, shifting them around in order to portray interesting relationships of abstract shapes as well as the illusion of [realism](#). Thus, the buildings in the left background are reflected in the glass in the right foreground, helping—along with the bright curving

line on the dark roof of the building slightly left of center—to tie the innumerable rectangles together. A geometrical order has been subtly imposed on a very disorderly scene. Estes has retained so much realistic detail, totally unlike Mondrian in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (see Figure 4-10), that initially we might think we are looking at a photograph. Yet, with a second look, it becomes apparent that this cannot be a photograph of an actual scene, for such a complete underlying geometry does not occur in city scenes. Moreover, people are totally absent, a possible but unlikely condition. An anxious, pervasive silence emanates from this painting. Despite the realism, there is a dreamy unreality. Take an early Sunday morning stroll in a large city, with the dwellers still asleep, and see if you do not perceive more because of Estes.

The line between realistic painting that is illustration and realistic painting that is art is particularly difficult to draw with respect to the paintings of Andrew Wyeth, hailed as the “people’s painter” and arguably the most popular American painter of all time. His father, N. C. Wyeth, was a gifted professional illustrator, and he rigorously trained his son in the fundamentals of drawing and painting. Wyeth was also carefully trained in the use of tempera, his favorite medium, by the professional painter Peter Hurd, a brother-in-law. So although a nonacademic and although trained mainly “in the family,” Wyeth’s training was professional. Wyeth is not a folk painter.

Among the great majority of critics, Wyeth is not highly appreciated, although there are outstanding exceptions, such as Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Wyeth is not even mentioned, let alone discussed, in Mahonri Young’s *American Realists*. Clement Greenberg, one of the most respected

FIGURE 14-6

Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*. 1948. Tempera on gessoed panel, 32¼ × 47¾ inches. Wyeth was probably America's most popular artist of the second half of the twentieth century. This is his most famous painting.

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critics of recent times, asserted that realistic works such as Wyeth's are out of date and "result in second-hand, second-rate paintings." In 1987 an exhibition of Wyeth's work was held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Some critics demurred: Wyeth makes superficial pictures that look like "the world as it is," except tidied up and sentimentalized. They claim that Wyeth is a fine illustrator, like his father, but that the National Gallery of Art should be used for exhibitions of art, not illustrations. Notice again, incidentally, the relevance of the question: What is art?

Wyeth's most beloved and famous painting is *Christina's World* (Figure 14-6). He tells us,

When I painted it in 1948, *Christina's World* hung all summer in my house in Maine and nobody particularly reacted to it. I thought is this one ever a flat tire. Now I get at least a letter a week from all over the world, usually wanting to know what she's doing. Actually there isn't any definite story. The way this tempera happened, I was in an upstairs room in the Olson house and saw Christina crawling in the field. Later, I went down on the road and made a pencil drawing of the house, but I never went down into the field. You see, my memory was more of a reality than the thing itself. I didn't put Christina in till the very end. I worked on the hill for months, that brown grass, and kept thinking

about her in her pink dress like a faded lobster shell I might find on the beach, crumpled. Finally I got up enough courage to say to her, “Would you mind if I made a drawing of you sitting outside?” and drew her crippled arms and hands. Finally, I was so shy about posing her, I got my wife Betsy to pose for her figure. Then it came time to lay in Christina’s figure against that planet I’d created for all those weeks. I put this pink tone on her shoulder—and it almost blew me cross the room.¹

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PERCEPTION KEY *Christina’s World*

1. Does Wyeth’s statement strike you as describing the crafting of an illustrator or the “crafting-creating” of an artist? But is such a question relevant to distinguishing illustration from art? Is not *what is made* the issue, not the *making* (see [Chapter 2](#))?
2. Would you describe the painting as sentimental (see [Chapter 11](#))? Could it be that sometimes critics tag works as sentimental because of snobbery?
3. Is this a pretty painting? If so, is such a description derogatory?
4. Is *Christina’s World* illustration or art? Until you see the original in the museum, keep your judgment more tentative than usual.

Propaganda

The purpose of [propaganda](#) art is to persuade us to believe a specific message, not to have an artistic experience. No species of the artlike is as realistically illustrative as propaganda because mass persuasion

requires the easy access of realism. The essence of propaganda is to spread political pride in nation, ethnicity, political commitment, or national purpose. Propaganda is created and spread by institutions of some sort, whether secular, political, or religious. These institutions are bent on persuading people to their cause by means of their message.

EXPERIENCING Propaganda Art

When we consider a Fascist poster such as Anselmo Ballester's huge poster *A Noi! (To Us!)* (Figure 14-7) we find it easy to resist the appeal, particularly as we know that Fascism resulted in a terrifying war in which upwards of 20 million people died. Once the historical situation is understood, even as technically good a poster as Ballester's is not likely to persuade any of us today. In the case of this poster, the message is "dressed up" for us with a beautiful young woman who has accepted the propaganda message and is now trying to get us to join her. The art itself is like the frosting on a cake, but in this case we know the cake is fatal.

This striking poster portrays a young woman giving the Fascist salute. She is caught up in what appear to be flowing flaglike billows of cloth. Their designs echo the then current [art nouveau](#) style in green and red, the colors of the Italian Fascist flag referenced below her right arm. Slightly grayed out, the heroic Roman arch and images of the ancient Roman SPQR legion remind the viewer of the once great military power of the Roman empire. One purpose of the poster was to boost morale and encourage enrollment in the military before World War II. But the more important purpose was to encourage young people to take pride in being Italian Fascists.

Fascism began in Italy on October 29, 1922, when Mussolini became prime minister. The cry at the base of the poster, *A Noi! (To Us)*, is a succinct way of praising the Fascist movement and at the same time saying, "Italy first." "To us" means that now Italy is for Italian Fascists and that people other than "us" come second.

When we examine this poster we see an idealized portrait of a woman whose expression not only is determined but tells us that she has a purpose in life, a sense of destiny. Most propaganda posters in the period before World War II (and during it) concentrated on the government's having preached to the people again and again that they

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were not ordinary folks, but folks who participated in a national destiny aimed at making them great. In this poster the allusions to the Roman empire blatantly declare a rebirth of Roman power.

Nazi Germany flooded Europe with posters of heroic SS men and saluting soldiers praising Hitler, all in realistic detail. The same was true in China during the rule of Mao Tse-Tung. Even today, huge posters of Mao stand in public places. Abstract art was condemned in Nazi Germany as decadent because it could not be turned into good propaganda for the system. The problem with propaganda art is not that it is realistic but that it is limited. Its message is primarily political, not primarily artistic.

In the case of *A Noi!* we see a realistic portrayal with dramatic swirling colors. The technique of the artist is remarkable and we would expect the result to have been effective in shaping the opinion of those who viewed it in its original setting. That is partly because the artist,

Anselmo Ballester (1897–1974), was the most famous designer of posters for hundreds of films shown in Italy from the period of the silent film to the great era of the 1930s and 1940s. His gift was interpreting the drama of films in a visual form. He does the same for the Fascist movement in Italy.

FIGURE 14-7

Anselmo Ballester, *To Us!*, Italian Fascist propaganda poster (ca. 1930), lithograph, 55 × 78.5 inches.

©DeAgostini/Getty Images

1. At first glance, would you recognize Ballester's poster as propaganda art? Would a viewer need to be Italian to recognize this poster as propaganda? Is the poster any less propagandistic now than it was in the 1930s?
2. What propaganda art have you seen? Which government produced it? How effective is it?
3. Some propaganda artifacts are not so easily dismissed. Try to see either *Triumph of the Will* (1936) or *Olympia* (1938), by Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003), a popular actress and film director who worked for Hitler. The camera work is extraordinarily imaginative. These films glorify Nazism. Can these films be considered art?
4. Compare Ballester's poster with Peter Blume's painting *The Eternal City* (see [Figure 1-3](#)), which was not designed to be propaganda but nevertheless presents an anti-Fascist message of a monstrous Mussolini and his Blackshirts beating people. In what ways are Blume's artistic choices much different than Ballester's? Are there any similarities?

FOCUS ON Kitsch

Kitsch refers to works that realistically depict easily identifiable objects and events in a pretentiously vulgar, awkward, sentimental, and often obscene manner. Kitsch triggers disgust at worst and stock emotions at best, trivializing rather than enriching our understanding of the subject matter. The crafting of kitsch is sometimes striking, but kitsch is the epitome of bad taste.

Of course, it is also true that kitsch is a matter of taste. There is no adequate definition of kitsch other than to cite the critic Clement Greenberg, who called kitsch vulgar and popular with great mass appeal. He might have been thinking of the paintings, sometimes on velvet, of girls with huge pitying eyes, of performances of Elvis Presley imitators, and cheap reproductions of paintings in the form of souvenir key chains and

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mouse pads. But he was also thinking about the work of painters such as William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), whose technique and craftsmanship are impeccable but whose paintings are to some extent empty yet very appealing.

Bouguereau is often cited as producing kitsch, which means paintings that appeal to the masses in part because they are easy to respond to and their skill in presentation implies that they must be important. They are completely without irony because they obviously expect to be taken seriously. They are designed to awaken in the viewer a sense of sweetness, pity, and sentimentality. Critics describe kitsch as pretentious, demanding from the viewer responses that the work itself

really does not earn. Kitsch is work that says, "I am very impressive, so I must be very important." In looking at Bouguereau's *Cupid and Psyche* (Figure 14-8), what response do you feel it asks you to give to it? What is its importance?

FIGURE 14-8

William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Cupid and Psyche as Children*. 1890. Oil on Canvas, 27⁷/₈ × 47 inches. Private Collection.

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Yet, no matter what one might say about *Cupid and Psyche* as an example of bad taste, there is a wide audience that finds it quite delightful. Who can resist the cherubic pair and their childlike affection for each other? Who can say that there might not be room for such appreciation, even if the painting does not have the same kind of aesthetic value as, say, Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (see [Figure 4-16](#))?

Jeff Koons's sculpture *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (Figure 14-9) portrays a garishly dressed Michael Jackson with his chimpanzee Bubbles. This sculpture, which was produced in an edition of three in a workshop in Germany, has been described as "tacky" kitsch primarily because it seems to be in such bad taste. Yet, one of the copies sold for more than \$5 million, and the other two are in museums in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

FIGURE 14-9

Jeff Koons (b. 1955), *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*. 1988. Porcelain, 42 × 70¹/₂ × 32¹/₂ inches (106.7 × 179.1 × 82.6 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchased through the Marian and Bernard Messenger Fund and restricted funds.

©Jeff Koons

Koons presented sculptures of vacuum cleaners, basketballs, inflatable toys, and other everyday items with such seriousness as to attempt to convince his audience that they were high art. Late in his career he even made essentially pornographic representations of himself and his wife, a former porn star. In the case of Bouguereau, there may have been no conscious intention to produce kitsch, but Koons certainly knew the traditions of kitsch and seems to have been intentionally producing it with a sense of irony and awareness. He seems to have been challenging his audience to appreciate the work not as kitsch, but because it is kitsch and that the audience knows it is kitsch. Bouguereau's audience, by contrast, would appreciate his work without an awareness that it is considered kitsch by respected art critics.

What all this demonstrates is that kitsch is a complex issue in art. Because it is essentially a description that relies on a theory of taste, we must keep in mind that taste is highly individual. Yet, we must also recognize that one develops a taste in the arts by studying them and expanding one's experience of the arts. A person with a wide experience of music or painting will develop a different sense of taste than a person who has only a meager experience.

Kitsch has been around for centuries, especially since the 1700s, but now it seems to have invaded every aspect of our society. Bad taste greets us everywhere—tasteless advertisements, silly sitcoms and soap operas, vile music, superficial novels, pornographic images, and on and on. Where, except in virgin nature, is kitsch completely absent? According to Milan Kundera, "The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on the base of kitsch." Jacques Sternberg says, "It's long ago taken over the world. If Martians were to take a look at the world

they might rename it kitsch." Are these overstatements? As you think about this, take a hard look at the world around you.

PERCEPTION KEY Kitsch

1. Do you agree that there is something such as good taste and bad taste in the arts? What are the problems in making any judgment about someone's taste? Are you aware of your own taste in the arts? Is it changing, or is it static?
2. Why might it be reasonable to describe a person who calls Bouguereau's painting kitsch as an art snob?
3. What is the form-content of Bouguereau's painting? What is the form-content of Koons's sculpture? To what extent does either work reveal important values?
4. What does it mean to say that either of these works is ironic? Does irony elevate their value as a work of art? Is either of these, in your estimation, a true work of art?

Decoration

The instinct to decorate objects seems to have begun very early. We know of few cultures that do not decorate their tools, their garments, their weapons, and sometimes themselves. The impulse seems to derive from a desire to have something beautiful to sustain their attention. The concept of beauty is not discussed in art circles today as it was even a hundred years ago. For our discussion of the arts, beauty is implied, but as we aim for insight and revelatory values in art, we can see

that beauty is only one quality of significant art. Much modern art, such as Duane Hansen's life-size figures, tends to ignore the idea of beauty. ***Decoration*** seems to be a universal need.

Decorated objects are often very beautiful, but they do not necessarily inform us of anything deeper than the fact that beauty is a human requirement, especially of developed cultures, producing pleasure. From the Egyptians, to the Greeks, Christians, and Muslims, the urge to decorate religious places, objects, and garments is universal.

Among the most astounding examples of decoration are the illuminated pages of the Book of Kells, a manuscript book containing the four gospels of the New Testament. With almost 300 folio pages of script and illumination, this book is one of the great treasures of the Trinity College Library in Dublin, Ireland. It was created by monks in Ireland in the late eighth or early ninth century and apparently buried for safekeeping during a Viking raid. Each illuminated page, such as the Chi-Rho page (Figure 14-10) took sometimes more than a year to complete. The level of detail on this page is such that strong magnification is needed to see all the animals, people, vegetation, and trees that cover almost every surface. The Greek letters Chi-Rho

FIGURE 14-10

The Chi-Rho page from the Book of Kells (ca. 800 CE), Trinity College, Dublin.

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FIGURE 14-11

Mihrab (1354–1355), Iran, Isfahan. Mosaic of polychrome-glazed cut tiles on stonepaste body; set

into mortar, 1,135½ × 1131by16.jpg inches.

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1939

are the first two letters in Christ's name, and the page is illuminated not just to be beautiful but to be a form of appreciation to the idea of God. Anything less detailed might be an insufficient form of worship.

Because Islamic practice generally rules out art that represents animals or people, the decorative arts in Islam are dominant. As in the instance of the great Alhambra in Granada, Spain, buildings are often decorated lavishly with tiles, including writing that echoes the Quran or the sayings of Mohammed in the *Kadith* (a book of his observations). Beautiful temple lamps, vases, wall hangings, rugs, furniture, garments, and everyday kitchen materials offer extraordinary examples of the Islamic impulse to create art. The fourteenth-century *Mihrab* from the Madrasa of Imami (Figure 14-11) is described as a prayer nook. It usually forms part of a wall facing Mecca in a mosque, but this example is from a school in Iran. The structure is faced with tiles that contain writing. The text across the top of the doorway is "Said [the Prophet] (on him be blessing and peace): . . . witness that there is no [God](#) save Allah and that Muhammad is his Apostle and the Blessed Imam, and in legal almsgiving, and in the pilgrimage, and in the fast of Ramadan, and he said, on him be blessing and peace" [Met Museum]. The function of the decoration is to venerate God while at the same time pleasing the worshipers in the mosque.

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The mid- and late nineteenth century in England produced a wide range of artful decoration when William Morris (1834–1896), poet, painter, designer, and proprietor of the Kelmscott Press, gave a major

lecture called "The Decorative Arts." Morris was close friends with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and most of the other Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of painters and writers. Morris began to create tapestries, rugs, and wallpaper with distinctive designs usually based on natural forms of trees, flowers, birds, and other animals. His influences were distinctly medieval, with a strong interest in Arthurian legend. While not as intensely detailed as the Chi-Rho page, his works covered every space and featured remarkably vivid colors. His wallpapers were much sought after. One of his most revered designs, Jasmine (Figure 14-12), features floral images in a pattern that is more exploratory than simply repetitive, yet it is a distinctive image, subtle, warming, with a constant suggestion of nature.

A more modern form of decorative arts is often unwanted and uncelebrated because it is produced anonymously in public spaces, yet a few graffiti artists have become recognized in the last twenty-five years. Keith Haring, Robert McGee, and Jean-Michel Basquiat are the best known because they moved their work into galleries where it could be bought. But most graffiti artists work anonymously and scorn the official art world (Figure 14-13). Their mission is to leave a mark, much like

FIGURE 14-12

William Morris, Jasmine, 1872. Block-printed wallpaper, 21 × 22½ inches.

Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Edward C. Moore Jr. Gift, 1923. Accession Number 23.163.4j

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FIGURE 14-13

Anonymous, wall graffiti, circa 2009. London, South Bank. The South Bank Arts Center on the Thames River preserves a space for graffiti artists. This segment of a heavily painted wall is typical of the mix of

lettering, forms, and color of the South Bank graffiti.

©Lee A. Jacobus

some of the paintings in the caves in France and the markings found on stone walls in the American Southwest. The urge of such artists is satisfied by making a statement, even if some of the time the statement involves defacing important buildings or illegally painting subway cars, train cars, and commercial trucks. Currently, mobile electronic devices, such as tablets and phones, have apps that permit them to make graffiti wallpaper and graffiti designs, demonstrating the public interest in this form of expression.

PERCEPTION KEY Decoration

1. Is the Chi-Rho page in the Book of Kells a work of art? If so, describe your participation with it and your understanding of its form-content.
2. What do you see as the relationship between William Morris's wallpaper, Jasmine, and abstract art? Is Jasmine abstract?
3. What do you see as the relationship between decorative arts and beauty? Which paintings in this book are most beautiful in your opinion? Are they related to decorative arts?
4. Do you consider the graffiti to be a work of art? If so, what should be its title?
5. Should the Mihrab be considered architecture or sculpture? Describe the sources of artistic pleasure it is designed to produce.

6. What are the revelatory qualities of any of these pieces? What values do you understand better for your participation with these works?
7. What does the fact that you can download graffiti to use as wallpaper on your computer tell you about its decorative values?

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Idea Art

[Idea art](#) began with the Dadaists around 1916. Although never dominant, idea art has survived by spawning “isms”—[Duchampism](#), Conceptualism, Lettrism, New Dadaism, to name just a few—with little consensus about an umbrella name that indicates a common denominator. Idea art raises questions about the presuppositions of traditional art and the art establishment—that is, the traditional artists, critics, philosophers of art, historians, museum keepers, textbook writers, and everyone involved with the understanding, preservation, restoration, selling, and buying of traditional art. Sometimes this questioning is hostile, as with the Dadaists. Sometimes it is humorous, as with Marcel Duchamp. And sometimes it is more of an intellectual game, as with many of the conceptual artists. We will limit our discussion to these three species.

Dada

The infantile sound of “dada,” chosen for its meaninglessness, became the battle cry of a group of disenchanted young artists who fled their countries during World War I and met, mainly by chance, in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1916. Led by the poet Hugo Ball, they assembled at the

Cabaret Voltaire. In their view, humanity had forsaken reason—utterly. The mission of *Dadaism* was to shock a crazed world with expressions of outrageous nonsense, negating every traditional value.

During those years the Dadaists for the most part tried to make works that were not art, at least in the traditional sense, for such art was part of civilization. They usually succeeded, but sometimes they made art in spite of themselves. The influence of the Dadaists on succeeding styles—such as surrealist, abstract, environmental, Pop, performance, body, shock, outsider, and conceptual art—has been enormous.

Picabia announced:

Dada itself wants nothing, nothing, nothing, it's doing something so that the public can say: "We understand nothing, nothing, nothing." The Dadaists are nothing, nothing, nothing—certainly they will come to nothing, nothing, nothing.

Francis Picabia

Who knows nothing, nothing, nothing.

But there is a dilemma: To express nothing is something. Picabia dropped ink on paper, and the resulting form is mainly one of chance, one of the earliest examples of a technique later to be exploited by artists such as Jackson Pollock. Picabia's inkdrops all had important titles, such as *The Blessed Virgin*, but they were visually indecipherable.

Idea art does not mix or embody its ideas in the medium. Rather, the medium is used to suggest ideas. Medium and ideas are experienced as separate. In turn, idea art tends increasingly to depend on language for its communication. And in recent years, idea art has even generated a species called Lettrism, or word art—see, for example,

Keith Arnatt Is an Artist (Figure 14-14).

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FIGURE 14-14

Keith Arnatt, *Keith Arnatt Is an Artist*. 1972. Wall inscription exhibited in 1972 at the Tate Gallery in London. Letters on a wall constitute the entire work of art, including the ideas behind the words.

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PERCEPTION KEY Keith Arnatt

1. Why would the curators of the highly respected Tate Gallery in London include such a work, especially one that requires such a large space?

Duchamp and His Legacy

Dada, the earliest species of idea art, is characterized by its anger at our so-called civilization. Although Duchamp cooperated with the Dadaists, his work and the work of those who followed his style (a widespread influence) are more anti-art and anti-establishment than anti-civilization. Duchamp's work is usually characterized by humor.

PERCEPTION KEY *L.H.O.O.Q.*

1. Is *L.H.O.O.Q.* (Figure 14-15) an example of idea art?
2. Is *L.H.O.O.Q.* a work of art?

L.H.O.O.Q. is hardly anti-civilization, but it is surely anti-art and anti-establishment, funny rather than angry. It is a hilarious comment on the tendency to glorify certain works beyond their artistic value. To

desecrate one of the most famous paintings of the Western world was surely a great idea if you wanted to taunt the art establishment. And ideas gather. Sexual ambiguity, part of both Leonardo's and

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FIGURE 14-15

Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.* 1919. Drawing, 7¾ × 4⅛ inches. Private collection. In several different ways, Duchamp commits an act of desecration of the *Mona Lisa*, perhaps the most famous painting in the West.

©Association Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2017. Photo:

©Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY

Duchamp's legends, is evident in Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (see [Figure 1-5](#)). By penciling in a mustache and beard, Duchamp accents the masculine. By adding the title, he accents the feminine. *L.H.O.O.Q.* is an obscene pun, reading phonetically in French, "Elle a chaud au cul" ("She has a hot ass").

Conceptual Art

Conceptual art became a movement in the 1960s, led by Sol LeWitt, Jenny Holzer, Carl Andre, Christo, Robert Morris, Walter De Maria, Keith Arnatt, Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, David Bainbridge, and Joseph Kosuth. There was a strategy behind the movement: Bring the audience into direct contact with the creative concepts of the artist. LeWitt claimed that "a work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist's mind to the viewer's," and the less material used the better. The world is so overloaded with traditional art that most museums stash the bulk of their collections in storage bins. Now if we can get along without the material object, then the spaces of museums will not be jammed with this new art, and it will need no

conservation, restoration, or any of the other expensive paraphernalia necessitated by the material work of art. Conceptual art floats free from material limitations; can occur anywhere, like a poem; and often costs practically nothing.

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FIGURE 14-16

Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Reichstag*. 1971–1995, Berlin.

©Regis Bossu/Sygma/Getty Images

In recent years LeWitt modified his early Conceptualism. In an exhibition in 2001 involving a whole floor of the Whitney Museum in New York City, a vast array of color fields, mainly within large geometrical shapes, blazed out from the walls. LeWitt provided exact detailed blueprints to guide a dozen or so craftspeople. LeWitt did none of the work and very little supervising. He provided the ideas—the rest could be done by anyone with a little skill. The creativity is in the conceptual process that produced the blueprints. The crafting is completely secondary.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude have produced huge public projects such as *Wrapped Reichstag* (Figure 14-16), in which they wrapped a sprawling government building in Berlin. They have financed their projects directly through the sale of drawings, collages, and scale models of their work. When they erected *Running Fence* in Sonoma and Marin Counties in Northern California in 1975, they constructed an eighteen-foot-high canvas fence that stretched for 24.5 miles across the properties of forty-nine farmers, all of whom gave permission for the project. After fourteen days, it was dismantled. The farmers kept the materials on their land if they wanted them. The effect was

striking, as can be seen from a YouTube video discussing the project in which those who worked on it report on their memories. *Wrapped Reichstag*, a much later project than *Running Fence*, made Berlin a destination for international art lovers because such a complete transformation of a major building such as this was a surprise. The mystery of the project was part of its appeal.

Christo has said of other projects that the wrapped object itself is not necessarily the art object, but that the entire environment in which the object appears is essential to the aesthetic experience. In this sense, projects of this sort are conceptual. They are impermanent, lasting only a matter of days, and they are based on ideas.

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CONCEPTION KEY Conceptual Art

1. Some conceptual artists assert that their work raises, for the first time, truly basic questions about the nature of art. Do you agree?
2. Is idea art, in general, art or artlike? More specifically, in general, is Dada art or artlike? Duchampism? Conceptual art?

Performance Art

Unlike conceptual art, [performance art](#) (as distinct from the traditional performing arts) brings back physicality, stressing material things as much as or more than it does concepts. There are innumerable kinds of performances, but generally they tend to be site-specific, the site being either constructed or simply found. There rarely is a stage in the traditional style. But performances, as the name

suggests, are related to drama. They clearly differ, however, especially from traditional drama, because usually there is no logical or sustained narrative, and perhaps no narrative at all. Sometimes there is an effort to allow for the expression of the subconscious, as in Surrealism. Sometimes provocative anti-establishment social and political views are expressed. Generally, however, performances are about the values of the disinherited, the outsiders.

Chance is an essential element of the form, which is to say the form is open. The factor of chance may weaken the crafting, for crafting is ordering, and chance is likely to be disordering in a performance situation. Interaction between artist and audience is often encouraged. According to the performance artist Barbara Smith, "I turn to question the audience to see if their experiences might enlighten mine and break the isolation of my experience, to see if my Performance puts them into the same dilemma." The performance is an open event, full of suggestive potentialities rather than a self-contained whole, determined and final.

Visual effects are usually strongly emphasized in a performance, often involving expressive movements of the body, bringing performance close to dance. In early performances, language was generally limited. In recent performances, however, language has often come to the fore. Thus, Taylor Woodrow, a British performer, and two collaborators covered themselves with spray paint, attached themselves to separate painted canvases by means of harnesses, stood there for about six hours, and talked with the curious.

Karen Finley (Figure 14-17) became famous for a performance work called *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, a piece that anatomized aspects of American society in 1990, when the feminist movement was strong

and when many efforts were being made to censor artists whose work was critical of American culture. Typical of many performance pieces, Finley used nudity, profanity, and an alarming attack on heterosexual white males, who, in her view, controlled society. In one section of her piece, she stripped to her panties and smeared chocolate over her body in an effort to represent what she felt was a woman's battered self-image resulting in a sense of disgust at her own body. It was no surprise that she was one of four performance artists whose work was denied support from the National Endowment for the Arts despite huge audiences and what became a national tour of her work.

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FIGURE 14-17

Karen Finley, a performance artist, uses her own body to make statements, often covering herself with various food products or other substances, such as feathers.

©Rick Mackler/Zumapress/Newscom

Ordinarily performance art does not repeat itself, nor does it produce a tour. But the resultant uproar from the powerful politicians in the community essentially guaranteed a widespread audience for Finley and has led to continued success. Like all performance art, *We Keep Our Victims Ready* was designed to be memorable and sometimes shocking. Because there are no rules for performance art and usually no way to buy it, the experience is what counts; and whether it is art may depend on whether you agree with the performer, who says it is art. For us, ultimately, the question is whether the experience informs through its form.

PERCEPTION KEY Performance Art

1. Does the fact that there are no rules to performance art affect our view of whether we can legitimately consider it art? One critic says that performance art is art because the performer says so. How valid is that argument?
2. If you were to strip down and cover yourself with chocolate, would you then be an artist?
3. William Pope.L, wearing only shorts and shoes, chained himself for six hours to an ATM in protest against capitalism, conversing with passersby all the while. Under what conditions might that constitute performance art?
4. Were you to attempt performance art, what would your strategies be? What would you do as a performer? Would it be obvious that your performance was art?

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Virtual Art

[Virtual art](#) is based on computer technology, often producing a mixture of the imaginary and the real. For example, imagine a world in which sculptures act in unpredictable ways: taking on different shapes and colors, stiffening or dancing, talking back or ignoring you, or maybe just dissolving. At a very sophisticated computer laboratory at Boston University, a team of artists and computer craftspeople have created a fascinating installation called *Spiritual Ruins*. One dons a pair of 3-D goggles and grabs a wand. On a large screen, a computer projects a vast three-dimensional space into which we appear to be plunged. Sensors pick up and react to the speed and angle of the

wand. With this magical instrument, we swoop and soar like a bird over an imaginary, or virtual, park of sculpture. We are in the scene, part of the work. We have little idea of what the wand will discover next. We may feel anxiety and confrontation, recalling bumping into hostile strangers in the streets. Or the happenings may be peaceful, even pastoral. Embedded microchips may play sculptures like musical instruments. Or sometimes the space around a sculpture may resound with the sounds of nature. Exact repetition never seems to occur. Obviously we are in an imaginary world, and yet because of our activity it also seems real. Our participation is highly playful.

The most popular form of virtual art is video games, which are played by hundreds of millions of people around the world. Video games have a reasonable claim to being today's most popular form of entertainment. Books have been written about video art, and the Smithsonian's American Art Museum hosted an exhibition beginning in March 2012 called *The Art of Video Games*, which lasted almost seven months. In 2013 the Museum of Modern Art announced that it is collecting video games, acquiring forty titles such as *Pac-Man*, *Tetris*, *Myst*, *SimCity*, and *Minecraft*. The museum's curators agree that video games are art, but they also insist that they are valued for their design. Many of the games involve elaborate fantasy-world art, such as *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath*; *Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga*; and *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. While the earliest games needed no narrative, many modern games have attracted film writers and novelists to supply the narratives and characters used in games such as *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly*; *Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare*; and the *Legend of Zelda*.

Violent or antisocial games, such as *Halo 4* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops*

II (Figure 14-18), as well as *Brothers in Arms* and the several *Grand Theft Auto* games, have created a fear that they contribute to antisocial behavior in some players. Defenders of these games point to developing quick wits, quick reactions, and judgment under pressure as being advantageous. Very few defenders or attackers comment on the artistic qualities of the virtual landscapes, realistic characters, or colorful interiors.

PERCEPTION KEY Video Games

1. If you feel video games are a form of art, how would you defend them against those who feel they are merely artlike?
2. Which video game of those you are familiar with has the best video art? What distinguishes it from inferior games?

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FIGURE 14-18

Call of Duty: Black Ops II. 2012. Video game, Activision.

Source: Activision Blizzard

3. How legitimate is it to compare narrative video games with narrative cinema production? How does the use of violence in cinema compare with the use of violence in video games?
4. Many people praise a work of art for its realism. Is video game art better when it is realistic? Or is realism a nonessential criterion for video game art? What are the essential qualities that made video game art satisfying to you?
5. Comment on the artistic values of *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*.

Summary

Artlike works share many basic features with art, unlike works of non-art. But the artlike lacks a revealed subject matter, a content that brings fresh meaning into our lives. The artlike can be attention-holding, as with illustration; or fitting, as with decoration; or beautiful, as with craftwork; or thought-provoking, as with idea art; or attention-grabbing, as with performance art; or fantasy-absorbing, as with virtual art. Art may have these features also, but what “works” fundamentally in a work of art is revelation. Because it lacks revelatory power, the artlike generally does not lend itself to sustained participation (see [Chapter 2](#)). Yet what sustains participation varies from person to person. Dogmatic judgments about what is art and what is artlike are counterproductive. We hope that our approach provides a stimulus for open-minded but guided discussions.

¹Wanda M. Corn, *The Art of Andrew Wyeth* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1964), p. 38.