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Art is a Popularity Contest, Not a Science

By Fredric

I'd planned on writing a related-to-photo rant today, but my brain is still too fried from the last week of my life to organize it into a coherent piece. Instead, I'm just going to ramble on about a topic that I've been about for some time (which still eventually becomes several paragraphs, but I'm not in the mood to do that). It's about the confounding question of the relationship between artist and audience.

Let me start off by pointing out something that is both important and often overlooked about the way the world of art works. There is no objective measure of the quality of a work of art. There are only subjective opinions. We've single-out, lionize and hoist some fragmentary few.

Let's use photography as an all-evidence if you think about it. Will Ansel Adams, landscape or urban, purists vs. things manipulated, composition, staged, or candid. The list goes on. I don't mean that there aren't some photographers who are better than others. I'm not saying that there isn't some kind of consensus among the world's photographers that is more liked by the majority of the population than, say, the photographs of Uncle Bob. I'm not even saying it has to be the vast majority of good photographers. We've Cross-Eyed more than 15,000 people discussing for a thousand pixels, the radio station playing Bob Dylan versus Bruce Springsteen. We've had readership crash and, by both pissed off sides. Yes, we have. The heart of Happy with only a 3.5 pixel.

Art is a popularity contest. It's not about the business of having an artist, it's not a popularity contest, it's not a democracy. It doesn't require a majority vote for you to be successful. Art is a popularity contest because it's about the audience. It's about the people. It's about the people who are willing to pay for it. It's about the people who are willing to see it, to hear it, to read it, to watch it, to dance to it, to sing along with it, to be moved by it, to be inspired by it, to be entertained by it, to be educated by it, to be informed by it, to be reminded by it, to be challenged by it, to be comforted by it, to be made to think by it, to be made to feel by it, to be made to do something because of it. That's why, ultimately, it's a popularity contest. It's about the audience.

Now, some of you left-coast by the photographic Lake up the Lake, or Lake Superior, or Lake Michigan, or Lake Ontario, or Lake Erie, or Lake Huron, or Lake Mead, or Lake Tahoe, or Lake Powell, or Lake Mono, or Lake Tahoe, or Lake Powell, or Lake Mono, or Lake Tahoe, or Lake Powell, or Lake Mono

Posted by: John London | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 09:27 AM

Well, I'll jump into this swampy ground, having lived it more or less professionally since the '70's.

First, I'd like to hold Ctein to his promise to write a series of articles on this. This is one of the only places on the interweb where such a discussion can be had with a cross section of people, and not have it turn into idiocy. That said, right out of the gate I've got some strong problems with several of the assertions above.

Possibly this has to do with a mixing of quite separate, although clearly related, topics. But I'll just say this as clearly as possible: art has nothing to do with popularity, democracy, or any sort of numerical measures of audience approval, even highly structured/focused audiences. The art is one thing, and the audience response is quite another.

Secondly, I'm getting a whiff, or more, of that separateness cloak that seems always to be getting thrown over photography, even after it has been repeatedly cast away. Those of you indulging in this, and that includes Ctein it looks like, are decidedly old school, and not necessarily in a good way. It's one thing to be devoted to a particular medium. It's quite another to believe that medium separates you or the work in some way from the welter of the rest of the visual arts. This is an artifact of a previous age, one in which photography was considered inferior.

I have so much more to say on this topic, but I won't gum up the works with some mega post. And BTW, I was within a hair's breadth of buying that print, even though it's not the sort of thing I would normally get—but $19.95! Come on! But I'm in the tiny % of people who have so many things still unframed, and already on the walls, and my own work besides—I just didn't have the wall space. Pity.

I hope we revisit this topic—please take note, Mike.

Posted by: tex andreas | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 09:29 AM

Any update on the '1000 True Fans' experiment?

Posted by: Sven W | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 07:29 AM

Thank you for starting my day with a great read. Excellent words of advice in your closing.

Posted by: Keith I | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 07:10 AM

I can't quite figure out this article, at least based on the title. Popularity is surely not the right word to use when comparing art, is it? Take the case of, say, Jack Vettriano - he would certainly win a popularity contest, but against what and based on what audience?

Ctein seems to be conflating popularity with the number of people prepared to buy a print, and by defining art as a popularity contest, is he saying that artistic quality is measured by purchases? But consider that the purchases of his prints on TOP are determined by the fact that they are presented in this context to a particular audience, I don't think any general conclusions can be reached.

Posted by: Richard Tunwell | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 07:04 AM

"The center of the universe is everywhere and nowhere." Giordono Bruno.

Posted by: Dennis Allsbrooke | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 06:56 AM

Boy, I'm going to largely stay the heck away from this one!

I think John Camp's earlier remarks rhyme most closely with my thoughts on (what I think are) the main points here. Particularly:

"Really great artists tend to be obsessives and tend to have a vision, and they rarely deviate from that vision (although they might thoroughly explore different aspects of it.)"

The popularity of a picture, or two, doth not an artist make.

Posted by: Kenneth Tanaka | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 06:51 AM

Dear Richard, (and Ed, et.al.),

Nope, not what I'm saying. I do believe you're conflating "successful artist" with "great artist." I am taking pains to not do that. Notice that I didn't discuss artistic merit anywhere in the post.

Not that that isn't a worthy topic for discussion. It just wasn't *my* topic.

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Dear Sven,

Yes, I've been meaning to write another column reporting on that experiment, but it keeps getting put off. Sometime in the next coupla months, fer shure.

~~~~~

Dear Tex,

I'm not sure I entirely get your point, but it sounds very interesting. If you could think about it some more and write an elaboration, I'd be most interested in reading it (either as a comment or an email sent to me).

I don't think I'm a seperatist. I've always thought of my self at the other end of that scale. But that doesn't mean I don't harbor unconscious assumptions and notions about it.

However. I'm intrigued. Please, do go on!

pax / Ctein

Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 02:23 PM

Heck, I have enough trouble liking my own work...

Posted by: Steve Jarosh | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 01:46 PM

Dear Bernard,

Actually, what you talk about is a real problem for someone who wants to be a successful artist. I think Mike has written about this (Mike, can you recall?); I know the two of us have talked about this. What it boils down to is that an artist is a lot more marketable when people have a clear mental picture of the kind of work they do. It can be about style or about substance or about subject, but if there isn't a fairly tight focus they don't have a clear sense of the artist in their heads. It's advice I was given almost from the day I decided I wanted to be a professional photographer-- tighten up my focus.

For better or for worse, it was never advice I was inclined to accept. Mind you, I thought it was very good advice, it just wasn't in my nature. This may or may not mean I've done better art over the years (we will leave future generations to decide that), but it very likely means I've been less successful at making a living from it than I would have been otherwise.

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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 02:01 PM

Dear Mike and Ed,

I think there's a slight statistical fallacy in this idea that the elite determines success and that it takes only one (well, two) people to make a $100,000,000 sale of a work.

Yes, it only takes one buyer with that much money and interest. But if there's only one person in the world who likes that work, what are the odds that that person will be a billionaire? It's still a popularity game; the more folks who like your work, the more likely some of them will have lots of money.

Putting aside the old argument about whether the elite have different taste from the masses (boooooring!), I can still make the same argument, just subdividing the world into two camps-- those with tons of money and those without. That top 1% isn't a handful of people; there are millions of them. So you're still striving for some modest subset of them that will support your art. And, still, it doesn't have to be a very high number. I mean, if one tenth of one percent of the top 1% collect someone's work, that person will be rolling in dough.

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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 04:07 PM

No argument from me Ctein but I'm still struggling to have my photography pay for itself. A few more people liking my work would be fine with me. I don't expect or need everyone to like it.

Posted by: Jim Ballard | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 07:02 PM

Art is neither a popularity contest nor a democracy. It is the expression of an artist and his/her muse. Society makes of it what it will.
The good fortune to find an audience (wouldn't vidience be better...no one can hear a photograph) usually means to an artist that they get to continue to work on someone else's dime. But most of us continue to express our muse even minus the dime, or the recognition. Because Art is alive on its own.
An investment portfolio that includes artworks misses the muse and misses the art. But it has its own reward and for the investor, that is its real and perhaps only merit.

Posted by: Mark & Leagh | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 09:06 PM

"Because Art is alive on its own."

Mark,
History is very much against you on that...The greatest art is almost always produced when it is most valued by the public and/or those who will pay for it. Lack of interest and demand almost always suppresses achievement and accomplishment. The Emily Dickinsons, William Blakes, Han Shans and Vivian Maiers of this world are the exceptions.

Mike

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Thursday, 29 May 2012 at 11:22 PM

Mike

"The greatest art is almost always produced when it is most valued by the public ....."

You're gonna have to justify that "greatest" epithet....

Posted by: Richard Tunwell | Friday, 25 May 2012 at 08:21 AM

History is very much against you on that...The greatest art is almost always produced when it is most valued by the public and/or those who will pay for it. Lack of interest and demand almost always suppresses achievement and accomplishment. The Emily Dickinsons, William Blakes, Han Shans and Vivian Maiers of this world are the exceptions.

I've always maintained that you and I will never know the greatest art produced because so much of it lives and dies in obscurity. The Vivian Maier work was found and then promoted by a single person. How many Vivian Maiers or artists in other genres work sits in moldy basements because they were more interested in making art than self promotion?

Posted by: Mark Steinelmus | Friday, 25 May 2012 at 10:06 PM

My Note taking on art readings:

Is art quality relevant?
Why a popularity ranking is unpredictable?

We want to believe that our delight in a fine painting/photography or bottle of wine is due entirely to its quality. But that's not the way reality works.

The scientists argue that price shift the preferences of the wine tasters, so that the $90 Cabernet seems to taste better than the $35 Cabernet, even though they were actually the same wine.

Subjects consistently report that the more expensive or famous paintings and photos are better, even though they were actually the same art. It is a perennial truth of the art business that high values or fame tend to attract critical endorsement.

The attractiveness of a photo increases with the number of people liking it. Popularity is like a snowball. The popularity itself play as large a role in determining the popularity rank of a photo as its technical skills qualities. A popularity ranking is unpredictable in practice due to their extreme sensitivity to initial conditions of exposition. Why a photo is popular may not have any answer. What we call talent usually comes from success, rather than its opposite.

But stools by artist Ai Weiwei, for half a million dollars? If art quality does not predict popularity why is art so damned expensive?

Art buyer pleasure these days is to be found in having their lovely friends being awestruck, in the important business of being seen as cultured, elegant and, of course, stupendously rich. You pay a premium for a piece once owned by someone famous.Something that has been shown in a museum is worth extra.

The people who are spending record amounts on art buy more than the pleasure of contemplating pictures, which they could get for $20 at any museum. They've purchased boasting rights.

In Henri Matisse time, his bold colors and distorted forms were outrageous. A century later, what was once shocking is now considered beautiful art. There are no rules of art that explain the evolution of art in history. Why would anyone think that their taste can predict what is necessary to make a work beautiful or meaningful? Anyone claiming to be a photo critic expert is selling something.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/magazine/15owlindesilah.t

http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2011/12/how-does-the-brain-perceive-art/

Posted by: DrDick | Tuesday, 15 May 2012 at 08:47 AM

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