

GETTING IT
A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING
AND APPRECIATING ART

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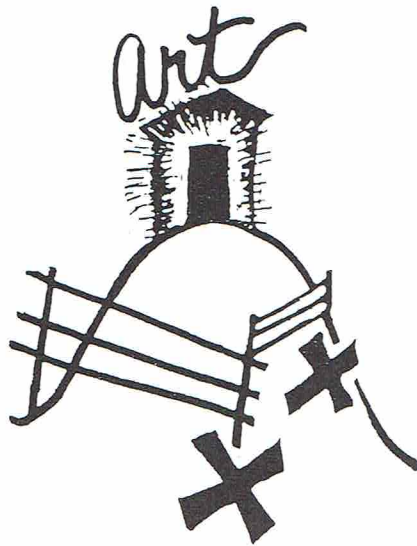
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CHAPTER ONE

BEGINNING

Open any picture book dealing with important art of the last century and you will see a painting by Jackson Pollock. *That's just paint thrown around...* you might say; *my child could do that.* Or you witness long lines outside a major museum, with people patiently waiting to see an exhibition of Piet Mondrian's paintings. *Such simple shapes, you think; what's the big deal? What's the point?*

We just want to Get It.
We have eyes, we have brains.
Don't we have a *right* to Get It?



Imagine that art --- *serious* art, the stuff that's hard to Get --- is hidden behind a closed door, high on a hill. Between us and it lies a broad field, a gap filled with all manner of obstacles: false myths and misconceptions, incomplete information and misinformation, prejudices and preferences stand in our way. Before we can begin to explore the lessons that art offers us, we need to clear away some of the impediments that block our path.

The first obstacle is the word itself: Art.

The Word...

How to begin talking about art? The word is so big that it is used to include just about everything that can be done at a high level of expertise: cooking is called art; so is Wall Street deal making; jewelry, clothes, furniture are labeled as art. And the people who do all these things are described as artists: there are tattoo artists and graffiti artists. Everything can be called art and whoever does whatever it is can be called an artist.

A stranger approached me at a cocktail party. *You're the artist?* she asked; *My son is an artist.* Making social chit-chat, I responded, *Really? What kind of work does your son do?* And she replied, *Oh, he's only eight years old!*

Poor artists. If child's play is considered to be art, should we consider what artists do to be the equal of child's play? Let me be clear from the start: what this volume addresses is *not* something done for fun, as a hobby or diversion. The art of the museums and art history books is exclusive, and some of the things it excludes are:

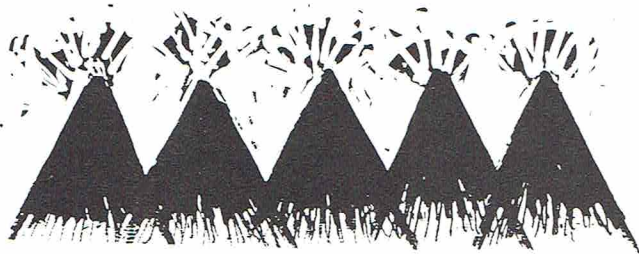
- things done for pleasure, leisure, and self-expression
- things done for interior decoration or accessories
- things done to advertise a product
- things done for therapy
- and things done for money, fame, tenure or other external rewards

Sure, it's possible for artmaking to be therapeutic or pleasurable: on occasion art is rewarded by a sale or by recognition; it can hang on a wall or fill a space in a decorative and pleasing way. But make no mistake, the art that this book deals with is not an adjective: art therapy is valuable as therapy, not art; commercial art is business; art education serves educational goals more often than aesthetic ones. The art of the museums and history books is different: rather than being created in response to external demands, it is *internally* motivated. It is worth serious consideration; it is significant; it matters. It is art with a capital A. Pronounced in a reverent tone, we pause slightly to signify its importance: head raised, a quick inhale and it's ... *Art*.

To complicate things, art is also *inclusive*. At its highest and most exclusive level (--- *Art* ---), it includes work that is pretty, ugly, or neither. It includes work made of precious materials and traditional art media (paint, marble, bronze) or of surprising, unorthodox and experimental materials (earth, light, even a urinal). It sometimes displays careful drawing, painting and craftsmanship, but it can disregard technique altogether. Art can take a lot of time and effort. Or not: it can be a spontaneous, effortless creation (based, of course, on all the work that came before). Some art can withstand centuries and millennia, and some is temporary and transitory.

Art can be *representational*, with subject matter related to the visual world. It can be *abstract*, with identifiable subject matter that is intentionally distorted, simplified or altered in any number of ways. It can also be *non-objective*, with lines, shapes and colors presented as lines, shapes and colors, not 'about' anything outside art's own formal language. Art can be overtly political; its subject matter can be troubling or provocative. It can be of the utmost seriousness or it can make us laugh. Art includes work of a highly personal nature, or it can be theoretical, intellectual, and universal.

None of these characteristics --- prettiness or ugliness, subject matter, materials, skill --- are the reason a particular work is considered to be High Art. It may help to think of art as an active force and the art object --- the painting, sculpture, installation or performance --- as the manifestation of that force. The art of the museums and history books *functions* as Art.



Art works...

"That isn't art..." I hear people say this all the time.

I wonder why we so often expect art to conform to a narrow definition with fixed characteristics, while we are open to the wide-ranging possibilities of music. We know that some music is intended to make us dance, some evokes rapturous praise, and other music moves us to be very still and quiet. We sing to it, dance, hum, pray, salute, march and make love, and we consider it all to be music.

Visual art, too, is multi-purposed, functioning in varied and numerous ways. And its functions are always evolving. Long before organized religion and science, art was a way to appeal to forces outside one's control; it functioned as magic. Before the invention of the printing press, art instructed. Before photography, art recorded events. Art's functions change, along with its materials and intention, in relation to the world which brings it into being.

Art matters. It has the potential to 'work,' to affect the artist and the world. It participates in the evolution of ideas.

Art is one way that truth happens. In art, truth is in the work. Art is one among a number of ways in which truth establishes itself --- political creation, religion, sacrifice, thinking. Truth is unconcealment, the revelation of the being of what is. (Heidegger)

And the artist --- the Artist --- who works at this rarified level is motivated from within to seek the "revelation of the being of what is."

It makes me nervous to use a term like *truth*, bandied as it is from talk-radio microphones, and to presume that we all agree on a single definition. I use the word as carpenters do: when the board is straight and aligned in all directions, the bubble in the carpentry level is centered, and the board is 'true.'

Artists don't go into the studio crying out *Truth, oh truth, where are you?* and few of them would be comfortable expressing their intentions with such elevated terminology. Instead, if they can describe their goals at all --- art is a non-verbal language, and some of its practitioners claim inarticulateness as a virtue --- artists might address the particular intentions of a specific work: its formal issues, its relation to an idea or event in the culture, its source. Jenny Holzer might describe the intention of her work to be the consideration of the anonymous voice of authority; Cindy Sherman might allude to the gender-politics of representation; Brice Marden might refer to his paintings as a continuation of Modernist formalism, exploring spatial ambiguity. Like building a pyramid, individual artworks often function like the building's foundation or a low level of stone, but all great art (literature, music, philosophy, etc.) reaches toward the point, toward that which is true.

You take something that is important to you, something you have brooded about. You try to see it as clearly as you can, and to fix it in a transferable equivalent. All you want in the finished print is the clean statement of the lens, which is yourself, on the subject that has been absorbing your attention. Sure it's autobiography. Sure, it's fiction. Either way, if you have done it right, it's true.

(Wallace Stegner)

Perhaps it is that kernel of truth imbedded deep within great art --- what the ancient Greeks called 'the divine center' --- that insinuates to us art's value and suggests that there's something worth "getting," even if we don't yet know what it is.

'Getting' it...

When we look at art, particularly art that is new to us, unfamiliar and sometimes confusing, we want to figure it out, to connect with its significance and meaning. Art is a visual language: seeing something that doesn't match anything we've seen before is like hearing a foreign language for the first time. How can those sounds mean anything? How can anyone understand it? And in art, how can those lines, colors, shapes and materials mean anything? How can *I* understand it?

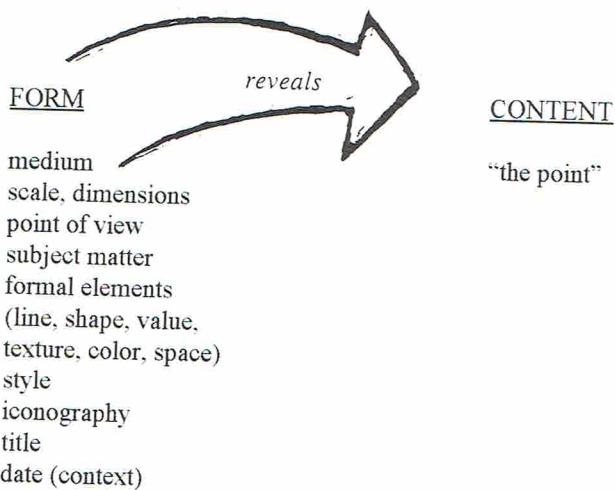
If you do not understand a man who speaks a language you do not speak, is this therefore proof that the man babbles only nonsense?
(Hans Hoffman)

It's understandable that some people, faced with Modernist and Postmodern art that is complex and confounding, might be led to one of two conclusions: that art is a joke, and the joke is on them; or that, with enough time and effort, knowledge and faith (faith in museums and authorities, artists and Art itself), something of real value will be revealed.

It isn't a joke.

We want a key to unlock art's meaning, a map to help us reach its point, a way to break its code. We want to Get It, to understand what the work is about and why it is considered to be important. That is the *content* of art: its point, its significance, its function, its subject or theme, what it's 'about' in the largest sense. The problem is that in art, in great art, content is not visible; it doesn't announce itself, and it isn't easy to detect. When we look at a work of art, we don't see its content, we see its form. Form, in the words of artist Ben Shahn, is "the shape of content." While content is idea and essence, form is material and tangible. Content is the fuel; form is the vehicle. Form is the way art moves us toward meaning.

The more the proportion of emphasis on 'idea' and 'form' approaches a state of equilibrium, the more eloquently will the work reveal what is called 'content.' Content, as opposed to subject matter, is that which a work betrays but does not parade.
(Erwin Panofsky)



The artist enters the studio with an idea. Thousands of choices follow; some of them are deliberate and conscious ones, while others are intuitive; some ‘just happen.’ Like a chemist working in a laboratory, the artist confronts the sum of all the elements and their potential combinations. The scientist doesn’t arrive at a discovery by arbitrarily mixing any and all of the chemical elements. The artist, too, limits the possibilities, choosing certain elements and combining them in relationships that serve the content of the work.

I thrust forward into space as science and the rest do. At a time when experimentation expresses itself in all forms of life, search becomes the only valid expression of the spirit. (Mark Tobey)

CHAPTER TWO
PREREQUISITES

Read

Trite but true: we know what we like. Sometimes our personal preferences, our likes and dislikes, can create obstacles to understanding art and appreciating it. Years ago I came across an interesting exercise (in *A Life of One's Own*, Joanna Field's essays on writing which is long out of print) that addresses the subject. Don't let the simplicity of this activity deter you; this exercise can change your life, and I commend it to you.

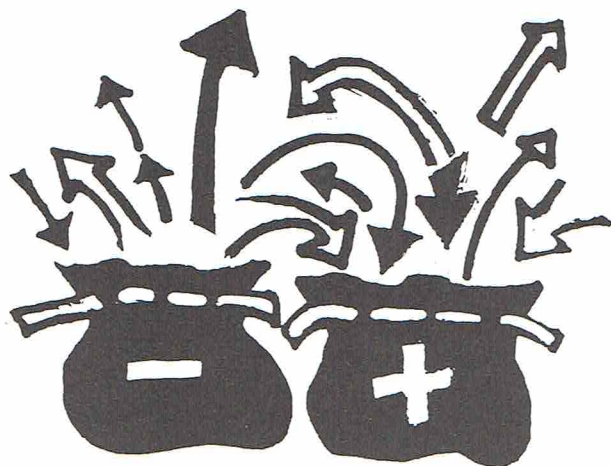
Divide a page into two vertical columns, one headed with a plus sign (+) and the other with a minus (-). Under the '+,' list whatever comes to mind that you really, really like: foods, movies, clothes, vacation spots, people, things to do, anything. Under the minus sign, list anything and everything you can think of that you strongly dislike: foods, personality types, t.v. shows, it doesn't matter. This is a private exercise that you never have to share with anyone, so you are free to be totally honest, and to make mistakes.

This simple activity creates a mental file and programs your mind to pay attention to your involuntary responses as they occur in the world, to be objective about your subjectivity. Since beginning such a 'file' ten years ago, I've continued to add to my initial list which started out as a record of rather trivial and unimportant items. As I go about my daily routine and encounter something that makes me think or even say our loud "I hate that!" or "I love when that happens!," I add it to my list. If you pursue this exercise for months or years, the things that move you to strong reactions --- personal responses that are individualized, spontaneous, unpredictable and therefore authentic --- can be wonderful tools for self-discovery. When we become aware of our honest, unprogrammed likes and dislikes, we can in little but significant ways begin to shape our lives to give us more opportunities for the 'plus side.'

(Since classroom teaching has cured me of self-consciousness and pride, I'll reveal a few recent items from my 'likes' list in order to make a point. I really like it when I'm parked at a traffic light, and the turn signal on the car in front of me is blinking in time to the music on *my* radio! I love picking up a random number of things --- paper clips, toothpicks, papers --- for a given task and having the number turn out to be the exact one I need! I love making significant eye-contact with babies in stores, glancing at a digital clock and having it read 11:11, and clothes with pockets. And I *hate* people talking during movies; cell phones in restaurants, films, classes, and *church!*; being told something --- car repair, doctor's visit --- will take X minutes when they know it will take Y.

See how personalized these revelations can become? Cheaper and more convenient than psychoanalysis, they can help you make decisions and structure a routine which will limit the negatives. For me it means making choices that give me plenty of solitary time, time for 'magic' moments to occur, and developing strategies for avoiding unnecessary interruptions. I don't hesitate to *hush* loud-mouthed moviegoers. And I shop for pockets.)

Our personal preferences are important to us as we look at art, but once again they help us learn about ourselves, and that is altogether different from learning about the art. The trick/skill is to be attentive to our subjective responses to different artworks and to learn about ourselves by discovering our preferences, but to keep our likes and dislikes separate and flexible. Our individual tastes can change over time.



I was raised in a quintessential family of the fifties; with an emphasis on good behavior and manners, we never raised our voices in anger. No wonder this particular incident stands out. As young adults, my sister and I discussed the film *Annie Hall* at a family dinner. "It's a terrible movie," she declared, and I, who *became* Annie Hall for days after seeing the film (five times), screamed with trembling anger and unprecedented wisdom, "You can say you hated it, but you can't say it is a bad movie!" Too often we see a work of art and we say *That's great!* when we actually mean *I like it!*, or we think *Terrible!* instead of *I don't like it.* Those are the times that our likes and dislikes become obstacles that can interfere with our Getting It.

Prejudice can get in the way, too. In the opening chapters of *Art: The Way It Is*, author John Adams Richardson presents a brilliant illustration of prejudice that goes like this: each of the four vertical columns of numerals listed below is arranged in a meaningful and significant way. None of them is random or arbitrary. See if you can make sense of each one; see if you are able to Get It.

<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>
0	0	3	8
1	2	7	5
2	4	9	4
3	6	1	9
4	8	4	1
5	1	6	7
6	3	5	6
7	5	5	3
8	7	2	2
9	9	8	0

Row A is obviously arranged in numerical order; B presents sequences of even and odd numbers; in row C, each subsequent pair adds up to 10. Row D is more problematic. Give up?

Surprise! Row D is arranged in alphabetical order. Eight, five, four, nine, one, etc...

Here is the lesson: it is almost impossible to understand the reasoning behind row D because it doesn't conform to what we expect. Numerals are most often related to counting or mathematics, and since our expectations are shaped by what we know and experience, we try to force the arrangement of symbols to fit our preconceived notions. No matter how hard we try, we will never be able to penetrate the mystery of row D with arithmetic; if we insist on using that key, we'll never unlock the door to its meaning. We'll never Get It.

We sometimes respond to art in a similar way. Bringing the wrong set of expectations to any work of art is like using the wrong key. If you expect all numerals to work like A, B, and C, you'll never get D; if you expect all art to be pretty or technically correct (or ugly and difficult), if you expect all paintings to be pictures (or to be non-pictorial) or all sculptures to be statues (or not), you will be locked out of understanding a lot of art.

I remember the first time I heard rap music pulsing out of a teenager's earphones from the back seat of a cross-country trip. Silly me, I thought music had to be something hummable, and as I cranked up the volume on a golden-oldies station, I thought and probably said *That's not music!* Now, years later, rap music has its own category for a Grammy award, and even old coots like I can recognize the brilliance of Snoop Dogg.

Prejudice is sneaky. It doesn't announce itself: *This is the voice of prejudice speaking.* Instead, it is subtle, speaking in a soft internal voice and manifesting itself in body language: a shrug, a facial grimace, a scornful scowl, a 'raspberry.' Our prejudicial voice says "that's *just* some paint thrown around..." "that isn't art," "that's *only*..." "pfttt!" Each of us has to learn to recognize our own personal biases as they occur, in thoughts, gestures and attitudes, and resist them: *TIME OUT!*

And what are some of the typical prejudices toward art? We tend to be biased toward what we are familiar with, what we like. So prejudices toward art tend to suggest that art is better when it's pretty and well-crafted; that artworks using precious materials are superior to those made of base media; that art that takes a lot of time and effort is more valuable than works that 'happen' quickly; that certain subject matter is preferable to others; that art *should be* --- insert words here --- realistic, precious, emotional, personal, impersonal, rational.

The problem is that none of these categories of art determine the greatness of any particular artwork or any one artist. Certainly, making sense of art would be easier if one category, one set of rules, or a single criterion fit all, just as it would be easier if it were nothing more than a matter of taste, *just* each person's opinion. But like anything of real importance, it isn't that simple. And it turns out that it is the very complexity and contradictions of art that make the effort to Get It worthwhile and satisfying.

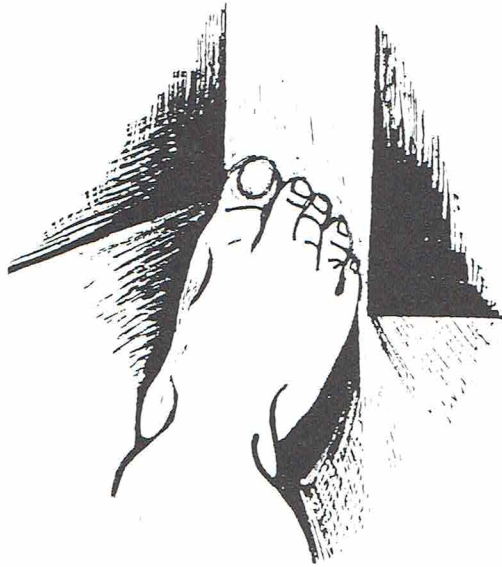
It takes time...

You'll never get it, my friend, if you don't take the time.
(Harvey Keitel's character in *Smoke*)

Someone --- a doctoral student, I'll bet --- computed that the average time spent looking at a work of art in a museum is ten seconds. Ten seconds! That's probably just enough time to glance at the art and to decide whether it appeals to us personally, to pass judgment on it and to walk away. Doesn't it seem odd that someone wanting to Get It would pass judgment on art as a first step rather than a final one? Because that's what judgment is: closure. We know this; in a court of law, after all the evidence is heard and all the arguments are made, a verdict comes. The judge pounds the gavel, and *case closed*. Judging, whether it's done in a courtroom or in a museum, is the last thing we need to do, if in fact we need to do it at all.

Who does need to judge art? Artists certainly do, since judgment *is* the process of artmaking. Every decision is a form of evaluation and, as the work progresses, so does judgment. *Is it working?* the artist asks; *Is it complete? Should I add, delete, reconsider? Is it worth keeping, or should I abandon it and begin again?* Museum curators judge as they select artworks and exhibitions for their institutions and audiences; art teachers pass judgment by awarding grades to student work; gallery owners evaluate art in relation to their clients' needs and the marketplace; art critics and writers judge art in order to make sense of it for their readers.

That leaves out most of us, and yet judgment is often the first thing we bring to the experience of looking at art, and sometimes it is the only thing. It isn't judging that is so harmful, it's *pre-judging* --- assigning value based on our personal preferences and inadequate information: *prejudice*. We like to think that artists, curators, teachers and writers make their judgment calls without prejudice and from a position of experience, knowledge and objectivity, and the good ones do.



Art is high on a hill, hidden from easy understanding by a locked door. We try to eliminate the obstacles in our way, and we search for the right key. If we are attentive to our personal preferences and prejudices, we can postpone judgment and keep our minds and hearts open to art's varied and inclusive possibilities. The door opens enough to reveal a thin shaft of light, evidence that something valuable and illuminating lies behind it. When we separate our subjective reactions and suspend our judgment, we create a wedge that holds the door open to possible understanding and appreciation. We've got a foot in the door. And the wedge? It's the Big Toe of Faith!