

"What are the limits of art? Should art have boundaries? Are there things art ought not to include/represent?"

Unexpression, an Argument for Restraint in Art

Entwined in the essence of art lies the fundamental, inseparable ideals of truth and beauty. With truth, every facet of knowledge flourishes and flows into a cohesive mirror that is humanity's cradle of collective understanding. With beauty, even more so, what can be understood as order hidden in disorder, a hidden glimpse of truth in a sea of lies, also reveals a reverence and divinity in the seeming mundane and a striking awe in the extraordinary. The mundane and the transient serves as a balance of sorts, a imperfect mirror image of one another. Mundanity begets familiarity and normalcy, providing the necessary conditions for comfort and stability. Yet, comfort stagnates growth and evolution; it promotes an oasis for the protection of the status quo, avidly yet desperately pushing away inevitable change. Transience provides illusory insight into the momentary, the unforgotten, and the ever-changing nature of the cosmos, an ever-present reminder of order, divinity, and sacrilege. Art, therefore, is presented as a reconciliation between disorder and order, beauty and shame, mundanity and transience. The role prescribed and its function can thus be described: to express the human experience, truth, order, and beauty; to conflict and reconcile with its own antithesis.

When art is, thus, defined, the boundary for art manifests as a necessary question. A similar question, which is implicit in the positories of the question is, "To what extent ought the artist to have full autonomy and freedom in expression?" The construction of the artist stems from its archetype. This archetype, however incomplete, communicates a semblance of truth. The free-spirited, non-conforming, original, visionary artist romanticizing every moment of their life, or living life in seeming mundanity, hiding all the inner artistry to truly achieve greatness, stands familiar. Oscar Wilde posits, "The great artists live in such seeming normality and boringness; it is the mediocore artists that embody that which they seek to capture in art through living...". When looking for examples for this statement, Emily Dickinson stands as a major proponent. Her life, seemingly, when observed from the outside, lacks the artistry that she instills into her poetry. The modernist and postmodernist movement in art shows a distinct emphasis on the inseparability of the artist from the artwork. A banana duct taped to the wall only makes sense, and evokes a sense of wonder, when placed in context with the artist's goals and life. Seemingly random blotches of paint sell for millions; it is for the artist's sake that the value arises. The artworks of Hitler are prized highly due to the identity and actions of their artistic creator.

Yet, can art really be evaluated through the lens of value through pricing? This pragmatic, monetary, and fully economic approach that seems to seep into every facet

of human livelihood is diametrically opposed by aestheticism or beauty for beauty's sake. "All art is useless", postulates Wilde. Yet, the postmodernist uses art to challenge traditions, whereby making art useful in some abstract sense. "Art stands apart from its creator", is a sentiment often shared by aestheticians. In some theoretical sense, yes, but pragmatically, can viewers of art truly separate the art from its creator? Should they even do so?

If art is bound to the artist, and the artist must live that art, ethical and moral issues appear abundantly. To depict a murder, an artist must murder. This murder may not necessarily flow outward, but may stem inward. The murder of one's psyche, of a fragment of one's soul, of a long lost memory, or maybe a metaphorical reimagining of a past lover. The intimacy of these rituals creates resonance among viewers. Perhaps Osamu Dazai exemplifies this quality; the horrors that he experienced, he transformed into haunting literature, "Mine has been a life of great shame", in *No Longer Human*.

To portray the horrors of violence, war, and rape, the artist must experience it, whether personally or as a witness. The divine witness, God, therefore, must be the greatest artist of all. Is self-expression, then, immoral, meant to be dutifully bound, for the sake of utilitarian goodness and social cohesion? A key to unlocking this dichotomy is through understanding the artist, not through their expression. Rather, understanding them through their restraint. The artistry is preeminently about control. The control of color, of sound, of time. Yet, this control is prominently explored through the restraint of the artist. The non-depictions of art, non-depictions meaning all the possible depictions of the artwork through different means, holds equal, if not greater weight than the actual depiction of the art. The choice of inaction, of purposeful inaction, in other words, holds greater weight than the action.

Thus, understanding artistic expression as a focalized choice of unexpression rather than expression underscores a seeming complexity and intricate beauty in artworks. The artist, therefore, should value restraint above all, even above beauty and order; for, restraint proceeds all else. The idea of the epitome of power being of forgiveness communicates a similar idea. "The greatest power is having every right to hurt someone who deserves it, yet, choosing to spare them". Similarly, "The great artistry lies in having the power to communicate anything in every possible way, yet, choosing restraint". Yet, is it ethical, or even fair, to judge an artist by their uncreation rather than creation? The idea of evaluating art through what is absent instead of what is present is extremely radical, and also somewhat absurd. There are infinite concepts, ideas, and possibilities in the absent, yet only a small finite fragment that is in what is present. How can viewers be realistically expected to evaluate the infinite rather than the finite?

This pragmatic tension arises from a justified concern. Humans, like all other living beings, exist in their own *umwelt*, their own understanding through selective filtering of infinite stimuli into the sum of a few senses. How can a being, designed for understanding and interpretation of the finite, seek to understand the infinite? Yet, beauty itself lies exactly in that paradox. The filtering of countless disorder into order, say, of musical harmony. Yet, its in trying to understand the infinite continuum of soundwaves and overtones and undertones through the finite lens of hearing that beauty manifests. It is in that exact liminal space that beauty appears; in translating the infinite into the finite. Therefore, the understanding of the unexpressed, the uncreated, the undepicted, serves only to reinforce the beauty and order of art; restraint seeks only to further reveal truth and order.

Entwined in the essence of art lies the cornerstone ideals of beauty and truth. These truths manifest in the mundane and the transient. Yet, it manifests in its purest form through restraint. It manifests when the infinite is prescribed to a finite understanding. This is equally emblematic of the human experience: the drive to understand the larger-than-life things, to express emotions that seem mountainous in scope yet poignant in intimacy, to establish meaning and truth in a cruel and seemingly absurd world. Understanding art through not just the lens of the artist, nor the finite expression of artistry, but through the vast boundless cosmos of the unexpressed, the uncreated, the nonexistent, critically emphasizes both the paradigm of thinking and the subtler emotions of feeling. As Wilde quotes, "To define is to limit", to unlimit, is, therefore, to undefine the existing forces that limit the evolution and human expression through the arts.