

What Is Art?

THOMAS McEVILLEY (art history professor): “What’s hard for people to accept is that issues of art are just as difficult as issues of molecular biology; you cannot expect to open up a page on molecular biology and understand it. This is the hard news about art that irritates the public.”

RICHARD PRINCE (artist): “I’ve always said art is a revolution that makes people feel good. I don’t think art has a consensus. I don’t think 10 people in a room talking about art could agree about whether something is good or bad art.”

WILLIAM RUBIN (curator): “There’s a consensus as to what is art in most periods [...] formed by those deeply concerned with the substance of art. This is not elitist, because anyone may participate. Basically, the larger public makes a subjective determination: I know art when I see it.”

PABLO PICASSO (artist): “Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.”

ARTHUR DANTO (art critic): “You have to project a hypothesis: Suppose it is a work of art? Then certain questions come into play – what’s it about, what does it mean, why was it made, when was it made and with respect to what social and artistic conversations does it make a contribution? If you get good answers to those questions, it’s art. Otherwise it turned out just to be a hole in the ground.”

BARBARA KRUGER (artist): “I think that art is the ability to show and tell what it means to be alive. [...] I do know just the idea that because something’s in a gallery, instantly it’s art, whereas something somewhere else is not art, is silly and narrow. I’m not interested in narrowing definitions.”

GIORGIO MORANDI (artist): “A sincere artist is not one who makes a faithful attempt to put on to canvas what is in front of him, but one who tries to create something which is, in itself, a living thing.”

LOUISE BOURGEOIS (artist): “Something is a work of art when it has filled its role as therapy for the artist. I don’t care about the audience. I’m not working for the audience. The audience is welcome to take what they can.”

ROBERT STORR (curator): “What’s interesting is when art changes people’s minds. [...] Good art makes you give something up. For years what the general public had to give up was Impressionism and the idea that painting should make you feel some human warmth. [...] Inside the art world a lot of these issues aren’t dealt with because people don’t want to be embarrassed. Lay people who react strongly may be better indicators, and the fact that they say it’s not art probably means it has touched a nerve.”

ROBERTA SMITH (art critic): “Art is always trying to [...] speak to people directly about pleasure and beauty, about personal capacity and freedom, about how individuals acting on their own can find themselves, express those findings and make a difference.”

BANKSY (artist): “To become truly immortal, a work of art must escape all human limits: logic and common sense will only interfere. But once these barriers are broken, it will enter the realms of childhood visions and dreams.”

THOMAS MERTON (monk): “Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”

ALBERT CAMUS (writer): “A guilty conscience needs to confess. A work of art is a confession.”

LEO TOLSTOY (writer): “If only the spectators or auditors are infected by the feelings which the author has felt, it is art.”

CLIVE BELL (critic): “What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? [...] Lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call ‘Significant Form’; and ‘Significant Form’ is the one quality common to all works of visual art.”

ARISTOTLE (thinker): “The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.”

OSVALDO GOLIJOV (composer): “Transcendence is the most important thing. [...] That’s what art is about. It’s at least the hope of hope. For ‘no hope,’ we have reality.”