Excerpt from *The Secret Agents* (Chapter 1.2: The Naming of Parts) by Ken Stange

BUT IS IT ART?

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Defining science and how it is done is difficult enough, but the challenge of finding a working or operational definition for art could drive even an aesthetician to the familiar protesting lament: "I don't know anything about art, but know what I like." (I suspect that this is the reason contemporary aestheticians so often seem to avoid this question, despite its centrality to their whole discipline.) Why should the meaning of this word present such difficulties—and often incite such vehement debate? And what are we to make of the fact that many cultures don't even have a word for "art"?

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Some time ago I wandered through an exhibition of African 'art' in some public museum or gallery in Canada or The United States. Frankly, I can't remember where exactly this was, but I do remember that a central theme of the exhibition was that most of the beautiful objects displayed were produced by anonymous artisans—and in cultures whose language lacked a word for art. Many of the objects were utilitarian or decorative: jewellery, graciously adorned utensils and tools, or statues associated with religious observance. In some cases it was unclear, or at least unexplained, what role the object originally played in its natural environment. Yet these lovely things from cultures where there were no art museums, no conception of art collecting, not even a separate word for what we call art, were nevertheless art objects—things possessing the mysterious power to draw the attention and admiration of people from a very different background. The necklaces were not adorning the slender, graceful necks of beautiful young women in the museum: they were mounted on display cases. And I doubt the statuettes were inducing any religious feeling in any of the men in suits or women in jeans that peered at them with unabashed delight. So what was happening here? How is it that these foreign, culturally displaced objects could retain sufficient value so out of context as to induce thousands of people to slap cash or credit card on a ticket desk just for the pleasure of viewing them? What would the people for whom these objects had a value integrated into their lives and view of the world make of this? What would the men and women who created these things make of this phenomenon?

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I vaguely remember something in the curator's written commentary, an implied answer to the above questions, which seemed to suggest that Western Civilization's conception of art was artificial, a meaningless conceit. Although I can appreciate the irony (and implicit criticism of both the self-importance of contemporary artists and the idolatry of those things some art critic decides we should call art), I certainly didn't come to the same conclusion. Art is a very useful concept, and that we denizens of the First World do have a word for it is to our credit. The exhibition in fact is confirmation of this.

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Because a particular language lacks a word for something isn't evidence that the thing doesn't exist. I doubt any of the native languages of the people who produced the work at this exhibition have a word for electron or VCR. In both cases this is reasonable and understandable, but for very different reasons. They may not have VCRs, so of course they won't have a word for them, even if such a thing does exist in my living room. But they do have electrons: they just haven't examined this aspect of their physical world in enough detail to become aware of the need for a word representing such a concept. But lightning still strikes in the heart of Africa, just as art does in the heart of all Mankind.

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So as with science, it is essential to the forthcoming discussion of creativity that I make my operational definition of 'art' explicit. I do not claim it is the 'correct' definition, only that it is useful, commonsensical, and relevant to a meaningful examination of creativity in the arts. So I will try to show

how I arrived at this working definition, but I will not attempt to convince that it is the best or most accurate.

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One reason so many people blithely but adamantly maintain that a particular thing—for example, an abstract painting by Malevich or Newman—is "not art" is because they personally have no aesthetic response to it. They are not "moved" by it, feel nothing when confronting it. Philosophers use the term "aesthetic experience" to describe this experience of being "moved", to describe the emotional reaction of the viewer or reader or listener to a work of art, to describe what it is people get out of art that draws them to it. Strangely this amorphous thing with the infelicitous label "aesthetic experience" or "aesthetic response" is a positive thing, a thing sought after, even if the label for the emotion elicited is a negative term: it seems reasonable to assume that people don't like to be sad, yet sadness is the term we apply to the aesthetic response evoked by a Greek tragedy or even a tear-jerker movie. Again this suggests a problem with definition: we are obviously using the same word, sadness, for two very different emotional states: one we would like to avoid and another we actively seek out. This is something worthy of further consideration, but for now I want to focus on the importance of the aesthetic experience as a defining characteristic of what we call art.

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It seems reasonable to say that only those things that elicit this aesthetic response deserve the label "art". However, this is not to say all things that elicit this response are art: we normally only use the word "art" to describe something created by the hand of Man.[1] The random play of light on the surface of a pond crowded with lily pads may very well evoke the aesthetic response, a response not, I think, substantially different or easily distinguishable from the response many people have while viewing one of Monet's lily pad paintings.

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So my operational and working definition of art is simply anything *created by the human hand* that evokes the aesthetic response. Removing those things that evoke the aesthetic response that are not created by human beings is not to denigrate them; it is simply to try to make the definition match what most people mean by the term—a fundamental principle for the creation of useful operational definitions. I believe it to be a simple, elegant and useful definition; and one most people would have no problem accepting as what we usually mean when we say something is a "work of art". It also has the advantage of avoiding the thorny problem of "beauty"—which confounds any definition of art based on the object instead of the appreciator's response to the object. Furthermore by shifting the emphasis from the cause (the work in question) to the effect (the response to the work), one avoids the confusion caused by the incredible diversity of art forms. The aesthetic responses to a ballet, a painting, a novel, a concerto have much more in common than do the characteristics of the causes of the response. But of course, there are obvious problems associated with my definition.

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First, there is the problem exemplified by the man standing in front of Barnett Newman's "Voice of Fire" at the National Gallery of Canada and whose only emotional response is anger at the amount of taxpayer's money spent to acquire this work (1.8 million Canadian dollars or well over 2 million USD) — and who would unhesitatingly exclude this painting from the category "art" as I've defined it, because he is most definitely not having an aesthetic experience from viewing the work. It is not difficult to sympathize with this emotional, although not aesthetic, response. The work is a huge, boring painting of a few stripes. And, interestingly, the more one knows about Newman (his other minimalist paintings, his pompous, banal pronouncements), the more one is inclined to share the casual viewer's outrage. But let's

[1] Perhaps this a good place to say that I will not, for stylistic reasons, be politically correct regarding so-called "gender issues". I find neologisms such as 'humankind' and the insistence on the phrases 'him and her' and 'he and she' obtrusive and silly. (I won't even say anything about such grotesqueries as 's/he'.) I'll use the masculine form of the third person singular, and assume the reader will understand that unless the antecedent clause refers to a particular male, the pronoun is intended to refer to both sexes, as it traditionally has.

return to this fellow in a moment after considering a situation less controversial which might cast some light on this problem.

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I remember walking out of a movie theatre several years ago after my wife and I had just finished watching the film, *Mon Oncle Antoine*. We both spoke simultaneously, I exclaiming how long the movie was, and she expressing, just as vigorously, how unfortunately short it was. In fact the film was fairly typical 'feature length'. My reaction was based on tedium, hers on dismay at the perceived brevity of her intense aesthetic experience. Both our reactions were expressed so strongly we burst into laughter. The point of this anecdote is not that "time flies when you're having fun"; it has to do with our subsequent discussion of the film which gave us both some insight into each other's psyche—as is the nature of such conversations—and that this discussion never deteriorated into a disagreement about whether or not the film "was art". I readily accepted it as a work of art—not because, incidentally, it was considered an 'art film' as opposed to a mere 'movie', but because I had clear and present evidence in my wife's reaction, that even if I found Mon Oncle a boring old coot, he still had enough life in him to elicit this thing called an aesthetic response in my wife.

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So to return to the fellow in The National Gallery, one can't help but think that his refusal to accept Newman's painting of a few oversized stripes as a work of art might not only be because he is unmoved by it, but also based on incredulity that anyone could have an aesthetic response to it. One could call this The Emperor's New Clothes attitude, the idea that modern art (including literature and music) is a giant hoax perpetrated on those who want to appear sophisticated. It so happens that I, too, fail to feel anything (except tedium) no matter how long I look at "Voice of Fire", but I am still reluctant to exclude it from the set of things called art, because I have had deep and 'moving' responses to other abstract art, even works more minimalist, that would have left our indignant gallery goer just as cold—and just as willing to deny them the elevated status of Art.

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My point is that the default decision for admittance to the set of things called art should be acceptance, not rejection. If we have anyone's word for it that a thing has produced an aesthetic experience, we must credit that thing with being a work of art. In a scientific experiment there are two possible false conclusions: they are called Type I and Type II errors. The former consists of concluding the independent variable has had an effect, when in fact it hasn't; this is sometimes called a "false positive". The latter, sometimes called a "false negative", consists of concluding there is no effect when, in fact, there is one. In science, as in common law, causes are innocent until proven guilty: it is generally considered better "to let ten guilty men (IVs) go free than convict one innocent one".[2] Scientists generally are more fearful of falsely attributing cause, more worried about Type I errors. In the case of art, however, we should take the opposite stance: we should be more willing to accept a thing as causing an aesthetic response than to automatically deny that it could just because it fails to do so for us. Things should be assumed 'guilty' of being art until proven 'innocent'—i.e., aesthetically meaningless to anyone who has apprehended them.

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The first obvious objection to my definition is that it is so extremely inclusive as to make the term 'art' virtually meaningless—an objection similar to one I will make about some definitions of creativity. (One is reminded of Andy Warhol's remark that "art is whatever you can get away with.") However, I don't think it is as inclusive as it first seems. It is hard to imagine anyone saying they have had an aesthetic response and received pleasure from contemplating most of what they see as they look around them, hard to imagine anyone claiming to be "moved" by a box of staples or a screwdriver or an electrical outlet—to mention some of the things I can see as I type these words.[3] And other common man-made objects we

[2] Actually in science the rule of thumb is a ratio of 20 guilty independent variables to 1 innocent one, since the traditional cutoff point for statistical significance is 95% confidence.

[3] Of course, given 6 billion people on this planet, surely almost any object might trigger an aesthetic response in *one* of them. So obviously there is some fuzziness to this definition and exactly how inclusive it is. This is unavoidable.

encounter may well deserve the appellation 'art'—e.g., the exquisitely designed and crafted chair in our dining room or even the clever eye-catching packaging on an item in our pantry. I think the discomfort one might feel with my inclusive definition stems less from its general inclusivity than from the implicitly positive connotation of the term "art". When someone asks, sarcasm dripping, "You really would call *that* art?!" I think they're really asking if I think it is good art—a very different question. I have no problem accepting as art, for example, the latest three-chord single from some currently mega-popular but talentless rock group, because obviously a large number of people are responding to it as art. One can see evidence of this every day on any city bus: the rapturous expressions on teenagers listening to their iPods and other portable music players. It is very important to realize that because something *is* art does not mean it can't be *bad* art. The evaluation of a work of art is another issue entirely, one to be considered briefly later on.

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Another, second, quite reasonable objection to my working definition of art is that it is circular: if art is what evokes an aesthetic response in at least some people, so what then is my definition of an aesthetic response? All I can reply to this is that an aesthetic reaction—i.e., being 'moved' or 'touched' by contemplation of a painting, a musical composition, a film, a poem or whatever—is very close to a universal human experience, so there is little practical need to define it. We all, or nearly all, know what it means to be affected by a painting, or a piece of music, or a poem. About this experience there is little dispute, unlike the question: "What is art?" So it makes sense to escape the ambiguity of the term "art" by moving to a definition that calls upon the experientially defined, and less ambiguous, "aesthetic experience." Again, I think any discomfiture really stems less from the definition begging the question than from the positive connotation of the word 'art'. Understandably a serious poet will choke at the thought of equating a sophisticated reader's empathetic response to her well-crafted work with some hormone-befuddled teenager's response to the saccharine lyrics of a top-ten love song. But the fact is both are aesthetic responses, and just as there is good art and bad art, there are profound aesthetic experiences and superficial ones. In fact, it may be that the differences in depth, or the nature, of the typical appreciator's response to a work of art is precisely what distinguishes the good from the mediocre from the bad.

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The third major problem I see with my definition is the one that has particularly plagued the visual arts since the invention of photography—and now has reared its head in the area of artificial intelligence. It might reasonably be labelled "the found art conundrum". Perhaps its most dramatic representation and confrontation is Marcel Duchamp's infamous urinal. This artwork by the father of conceptual art did more to challenge thinking about art (or at least visual art) than any other 'creation' before or since. The story is familiar to any artist or student of the arts. In February of 1917, The Society of Independent Artists in New York City held an open exhibition. The fascinating and enigmatic Marcel Duchamp made a clear, albeit implicit, statement of his definition of art as "whatever the artist chooses to call art" when he installed as his contribution to the show a work named "Fountain"—a decidedly ugly urinal which he had 'signed' "R. Mutt"[4] and stood on end to add a phallic connotation.

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I reject Duchamp's implied definition[5] as useless because it is so contrary to popular conception—in fact, deliberately antagonistic to the conventional concept of art. (This was intentional, of course, because baiting the bourgeoisie was the most popular sport among artists of the time). Artists are not magicians who can turn anything into art by calling it art. Aside from the alienating *hubris* of any artist who defines art as that which he chooses to call art (a *hubris* just as extreme as that of the philistine who defines art as only what he personally likes), this arrogant definition excludes from the set of things called art all the wonderful music and sculpture and narrative in cultures where there isn't even really a conception of 'artist' or 'art'.

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[4] Apparently a character in a popular cartoon of the time was named Mutt.

[5] Duchamp was always reticent to make any explicit or direct statements about art, preferring his work to speak for itself.

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However, I do accept Duchamp's urinal as a work of art. It does not matter to me that he, Marcel Duchamp *The Artiste*, chose to call his piss-pot art. I don't think the artist's intention is relevant to defining art. I may intend to create a work of art, but it is only accepted as a work of art if it produces an aesthetic response in someone: if everyone who looks at my creation just shrugs, then my best intentions mean nothing. On the other hand, I may have no intention of creating a work of art when I take a casual snapshot that when shown to others elicits comments about how beautiful and moving the image is. Why I—and I am sure many other people—sincerely do respond to DuChamp's urinal with what could justifiably be called an aesthetic response has nothing to do with his intention or with his actually physically creating the object.

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Duchamp didn't make the urinal: he merely found it, named it, flipped it over, put it on a pedestal, and signed it with a pseudonym. His gesture was a natural extension of what the photographer does: the man with a camera does not 'make" the striking image that he would call art; he 'merely' mechanically 'captures' on film what is already there.[6] Only God can make a tree, so trees cannot be art by the proffered definition. But then does an 'exact' two dimensional copy of this tree on film have any claim to being art?[7] And Duchamp's urinal, while not created by God, but rather by the collaboration of some anonymous urinal designer[8] and factory worker, would not normally be considered art—because it is extremely difficult to imagine it eliciting an aesthetic response outside of the historical and cultural context in which Duchamp embedded it.

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I think the way around this apparent conundrum is to admit that a thing is more than its physical "thingness": it is almost magically enriched by the experience of the person experiencing it. (Note the 'magic' here is in the mind of the beholder, not in the hand—or mouth—of the artist.) In the case of Duchamp's urinal, it is the whole historical and cultural context that those confronting it bring to it. Art is never free of external referents. If everyone came to his urinal without being already equipped with the contextual knowledge that makes it significant, no one would respond to it—and it would just remain a urinal. Imagine a world where no one understood English and no Rosetta Stone existed to decipher the language. Would *Hamlet* be art? I admit my definition would indeed deny it the status of art, as it would also deny that honour to Beethoven's last string quartets were all human beings deaf. This might make some uncomfortable, but I think this exclusiveness is a small price to pay for the usefulness of the definition and its congruence with what both the sophisticated and the naive mean by the word *art*. It also balances to some extent the otherwise very inclusive nature of my definition.

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[6] Of course I know the photographer frames it. and chooses certain camera settings, and then later modifies it in his darkroom or in PhotoShop. I'm not denigrating photographic art. The point is that the original image is out there, *found* in the real world.

[7] Of course, a photographic image is not really an "exact copy", a topic to be considered later.

[8] It is illuminating that another term for found-art is a "ready-made", as if the urinal popped into existence and the petit bourgeois designer of it and the proletariat factory worker who made it were of absolutely no importance—unlike the artist with his magic powers to give this humble object deep significance.