

Atlas W. L.

Hartland, Vermont

A Collection of Gods Offering You a Social Opening

Monotype, papier mache, collage, textile

As I was growing up, every year my dad made exorbitant amounts of papier mache masks for my brother on halloween, spending up to a month shaping frilled lizards and stormtroopers and E.T. We had masks from friends' puppet companies around the house and wore them at my parents' wedding. I think I was always fascinated by that kind of art; meant to be interacted with and used until they fall apart; art built for humans.

I didn't think very consciously about what inspired the idea of a series of masks, but as I've been making them, several artists and separate media have come up. It's been pointed out that they're very reminiscent of the video series *Don't Hug Me I'm Scared* and the book *Stairway to the Sun/Dance of the Comets* by Paul Scheerbar. I've also thought a lot about Nick Cave's soundsuits and that process, and over break I visited my cousin Maria Bennet during her open studio— a lot of her recent art is experimental mixed media and really influenced my thought process towards a lot of these masks.

I had a lot of free time with this piece, seeing as my topic was on the concept of art as a whole; I let my research guide me, and further parallels between my research and artwork came up in progress. This project is so deeply rooted in the ideals of my research that I kept being able to come up with new ways to connect the masks and the philosophy I studied.

Thank you for taking advantage of this social opening, and using your autonomy to trust these masks.

Art as God:
A Partial Manifesto of Divine Aesthetics



Atlas W. L.

The Oxbow School

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I. WRITER'S NOTE

This paper addresses subjectivity in art, and how the relationship between the viewer and object is what makes it art. It then compares that relationship to what one might have with a god, arguing how the relationship between the believer and subject is what makes it a god. Beginning with an anecdote focusing on the nature of what god is, it then transitions into an examination of Duchamp's Fountain, using that as an avenue for exploring the boundaries of art. Finally, it closes with two aesthetic philosophers discussing the nature of art as communication, as a social tool, interwoven with discussion of religion.

I'm very invested in why we make art: what motivates us, why do we find some pieces appealing and others not, why, even if we don't enjoy something, can we still recognise it as art? After discussing these concepts with multiple published artists I'm acquainted with, I felt almost glowing with the reminder of how universal creativity is.

II. ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE OF A GOD OF JOY

I was raised by artists, philosophically and in practice, and creating things is fundamental to my worldview. I was raised as a printmaker and painter. I was raised to enjoy art on a soul level, to expand the definition as much as possible, to refine my aesthetic values and to question my opinions on other people's art practices. I was raised knowing that good art plucks someone out of their static patterns and reimagines them as autonomous beings with their own thoughts and feelings and alters their rhythm. I was raised to be in service of art as a higher power, as something bigger than myself— acting as a channel for the current of the art spirit.

Today, after a decade and a half of this rhetoric, I think a lot more critically towards preconceived notions of what art is. I'm drawn specifically to an argument that asks whether art is

the object itself, or rather the relationship between the art object and the viewer— some larger concept we can only hope to one day access.

As perhaps expected with my childhood of deep faith in ink and paper, I was raised extremely atheist. When I was seven, I asked my parents about the story of Jesus multiplying fish and loaves of bread, and my mother told me that actually, he turned a fish *into* a singular loaf of bread- very sufficient for his hundreds of followers, and a really meaningful power to have as the son of God. Not being Christian wasn't really a social problem for us— almost all of our family friends were Jewish. I grew up celebrating Shabbat with the Grosses and the Mannings almost every other Friday night, and those are most certainly the moments I've felt closest to God -- warm houses full of good friends, and good food, a gracious allowance into their weekly ceremony. Some nights I would help make dinner or arrange the seder, some nights I would have been too late coming home from soccer to help -- but that in and of itself felt religious, watching the sun set from the passenger seat with the warm promise of challah ahead and the feeling of peace already settled in my stomach.

Years later, in the very beginning of quarantine, I was on Facetime with a few friends from summer camp, all also Jewish. We stayed up until one AM, scattered across the east coast and discussing existentialism. Somewhere in there, my friend Eliana started to talk about God, and what she believed in— not some old white man in the sky with a beard, but rather something you would find in sunkissed apples and fresh-baked cookies and dewy grass. An abstract idea, a feeling -- much like art can be argued to be the *relationship* between the viewer and the object as opposed to the object itself. “Some current you can tap into that makes you feel like you are a part of something bigger than you.” (Everyone looked starry-eyed in their iphone frames). “There must be something that has made every piece of human civilization believe in some kind of God, and

it's not that we're all just stupid lapdogs, right?" (Everyone laughed). "It's that there must be something observing and interpreting, you know? Subjective to the viewer, of course, to the believer, I guess, and my subjective truth is that God is my mother's embrace."

Today, I don't find myself believing in anything but that. Having faith is not my strong suit, and that includes having faith in that argument, but it's the one I find myself returning to time after time. Maybe God is found in moments of profundity -- joy, fear, and their mediator, hope -- or maybe God is profundity. Maybe God is not a person, but a feeling or experience -- since the relationship between the believer and the god is what makes them a god, is not the relationship itself a kind of god? Much like how our relationship with art is what makes it art, the process of believing in the God-object-- Adonai, Allah, the christian God-- *creates* God, or the God-action. They are both derived from the subjective relationship between viewer and viewed, believer and believed in. They are both fundamental to human nature, and to community. Art matters because we say it does, and God exists because we say it does, and that is the fundamental essence of both.

III.A CASE STUDY IN SANITARY WARE

Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) was a 20th century visionary, making art that pushed the boundaries and asking the same questions about what exactly art was, examining the same subjectivity. He was classically trained and worked in many different mediums--he was a stunning painter -- but gained the most attention for his found object pieces. In the year 1917, he produced possibly his most famous work: *Fountain*, a standard, standalone urinal signed "R. Mutt 1917." It belonged to a class of art he called "readymades," an everyday commercial object designated by

the artist as a work of art (and, in this case, interpreted in some way). He purchased a urinal from a sanitary ware supplier and submitted it – or arranged for it to be submitted – as an artwork by ‘R. Mutt’ to the newly established Society of Independent Artists that Duchamp himself had helped found and promote, which was based on ideals of a democratic gallery, with pieces organized by alphabetical order and not subjective preference. The society’s board of directors, who were bound by the Society’s constitution to accept all members’ submissions, took exception to *Fountain*, believing that a piece of sanitary ware – and one associated with bodily waste – could not be considered a work of art and furthermore was indecent (presumably, although this was not said, if displayed to women).

Every director present during the installation of the show formed a council and conducted a vote, which, at very close competition, decided to exclude *Fountain* from the gallery. Duchamp resigned from the gallery, protesting the board vetoing and censoring an artist’s work and therefore violating the base values of the Society. He, along with another artist friend, later anonymously produced a periodical titled *blindman*, which more publicly protested the board’s actions and focused on the case study of *Fountain* itself: “Mr Mutt’s fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers’ shop windows. Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.” (The Blindman, 1917).

So what makes art, art? How can we call something that is just a chosen toilet, art? It feels like it is, to me at least – the subjective art-vibes are there – but is it really? How can we tell? How do we know? What defines it for all of us? Why do the directors of this gallery get to decide, and

why does Duchamp get to tell them they're wrong? He states that it is art because of the title and point of view he gives it – because he calls it art.

Art is subjective. That is undeniable; the concept of what art is or what makes art beautiful is inherently based on opinion. It's almost a matter of feeling; this just feels like art to me right now. How else can you qualify it?

However, there is also a necessary element of objectivity. There is a real value in there for you to perceive, regardless of whether you perceive it or not. There would be no art without people – you need interpretation to have the art. The art-moment that we are all chasing after is something that inherently requires other people to happen. Sometimes it isn't purely about making things you think are good or beautiful or valuable, sometimes it's about connecting with people on mutual ground, agreeing on something objective to be found within the subjectively interpreted object. The objective element is, in itself, a very vague thing; is it a value that we, as viewers, have collectively agreed upon? Or is it a more innate, universal standard?

Subjectivity is a wonderful and freeing concept to think about, but it relieves the artist of having to answer the question “why are you making this?” Your sentiments require no justification, but do you actually believe that it's meaningful and worth your time? Pursue excellence, not for personal gain or distraction, but because you know that it exists, that it's attainable. There is a meaning to art, but you are not inventing it. You're discovering it.

Making things should be a balance between the objective and the subjective, a balance between your internal truths and the art-moment that you want to happen. Putting art in a box of pure objectivity or pure subjectivity is trying to sort something cosmic and divine into containers it created.

IV. NGUYEN AND RIGGLE MUSE ON INTERPERSONAL AESTHETICS

C. Thi Nguyen, a contemporary philosopher and teacher, states in his paper “Trust and Sincerity in Art” that art and aesthetics are an exercise in trust. The audience trusts the artist to make it *worth their while* to put in the work to understand a work of art that exists outside of their commonly explored aesthetic spheres; the artist trusts the audience to put in the work to understand a “difficult” work of art. He posits that there are three kinds of aesthetic trust: trust in aesthetic steadfastness, trust in aesthetic competence and trust in aesthetic sincerity. Trust in steadfastness is to rely on a person to act from their commitment to a specific aesthetic field or sensibility – to continue making the same kind of thing, which, from previous work, you know you can trust to be worth your while. Trust in competence is to rely on a person to “meet their commitment to successfully bring about aesthetically valuable states of affairs” (Nguyen 16), or to do their ideals, essences and aesthetic truths justice. Trust in aesthetic sincerity, potentially the most important trust there is, is trust to meet their commitment to act from aesthetic considerations. In other words, to trust their commitment to beauty, to the higher power of art and creation, to their personal truths and the truths of the bigger picture of art. When this kind of trust is broken, when the artist is acting not in pursuit of beauty or understanding of the greater picture of art, but rather out of desire for some reward (capital, fame, influence) the audience is betrayed.

This kind of trust is not dissimilar to the kind of trust we place in a god. When you believe in a higher power, you trust in that higher power to make your faith (or *trust*) worth your while. You trust it to not necessarily make everything easy, but, with purpose and intent, to make living life a beautiful thing (sincerity). You trust them to carry out this promise well and do justice to this

promise in exchange for your faith for daily practice (competence). And, if there exists a pantheon in which you place your faith, you trust them each to stick to their own domains; if you name your faith to a god of the harvest, you expect them and no one else to maintain the cycles that exist therein (steadfastness).

Whatever your god does is a kind of art in and of itself; the creation and maintenance of something beautiful. When you are in your mother's arms and think '*this is godly*', are you not also thinking, '*this is beautiful*'? '*This is art*'? When you witness something beautiful, miraculous, divine in your daily life, do you think, '*that was just like a movie!*'? It was a movie. That was an art-moment, made beautiful because of your art-action, you witnessing and processing it. The divine is made divine because of your god-action, you witnessing and processing it.

Similarly, the divine (the artist) places trust in you to trust them; to conduct your rituals, to continue your faith, to act in your daily life according to the principles you have agreed on. They trust you to put in the work, so that they can make the effort worth it— to use your autonomy to keep choosing them.

A colleague of Nguyen's, Nick Riggle, published a book in 2007 titled, *ON BEING AWESOME: a unified theory of how not to SUCK*. It speaks on the social scripts and patterns we follow in life, in order to make daily interactions generally easier. There is a social script to follow for first-time meetings, for barista-customer interfaces, for teacher-student constructive criticisms. They are pre-written, cordial and static. Theoretically (not necessarily in practice), we know how to act, how to correctly follow these scripts. He points out that in our daily lives, interacting with each other, there are moments when we are offered a chance to break out of these patterns and experience ourselves and each other as individual, conscious beings as opposed to players in the game of social interaction. He calls these opportunities "social openings" and they are

opportunities for us to break the script and appreciate who we are as individual, conscious, creative beings.

Riggle posits that to be awesome is to “encourage, foster, create and take up social openings” (Riggle, 2017). To SUCK is to leave them to wilt behind you, continuing with the polite distance of the planned conversation; to crush and mock them for no good reason. These concepts are, of course, larger and broader than aesthetics, but Riggle believes the most potent place to let these openings grow and appreciate each other as free beings is in a creative setting, with art and aesthetics; that is the center of awesomeness.

Art moments – art relationships — the moment of relation between the art-viewer or art-maker and the art-object are social openings, taken. The shock that snatches people from the repetitive routine of daily life and replaces them as conscious, creative beings in a divine moment, is what we as artists are in service of. You are in service of others, in service of the thing you are making, and in service of the relation between the two—the art-moment—not in service of yourself.

If we can draw so many parallels between aesthetics and a kind of god, is it so ridiculous to imagine that creation itself is a kind of religion? That when you create something, you are participating in the divine? Is it so ridiculous to believe that a god made us in its image so we could create thusly in our own image? That out of every god-moment, every beautiful thing, creation is the most valuable; art is a god of its own.

V. YOU, AS A VESSEL FOR THE DIVINE CREATIVE, GO FORTH AND GIVE THE WORLD THE GIFT OF YOU.

Make things. Do not be afraid to make things. Trust and believe and create as much as you can in service of the greater aesthetic current, the bigger driving force of art, the god we all believe in.

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