



No. 1
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Art as Inherently Interesting

What is art? That's too complex a question. Art, understood in its most general sense as the processes or products of human creation, has many uses. It is better to ask something more modest: what could art be? What sorts of ends could our creative powers be directed towards?

Most of us, as a result of the enlightenment, have come to think of art as purely instrumental: a painting might express an idea, convey a mood, or stimulate delight in an observer. An artist might engage in the artistic process in order to please, comfort or challenge themselves, communicate with or impress others, or achieve deeper self-understanding.

None of these ends are objectionable in and of themselves. But when these are taken to be the sole purposes of art, they become limitations, preventing the artist from pursuing something higher, more noble, reducing the artwork to the status of a mere tool, totally relativizing its worth to our subjective goals or psychological states.

In focusing only on the instrumental functions of art, we often overlook the inherent beauty, value or pleasantness of the artwork. We tend to make our own individual or collective idiosyncrasies and fickle preferences the ultimate evaluative criteria of whether an artwork deserves to be taken seriously. Approaching aesthetic judgement in this way makes an artwork successful, worthy of praise, only if it can live up to a host of unstable, often arbitrary standards, produced more by historical accident than a process of rational development. In our time, art has become subject to the cult of utility, the religion of "usefulness."

But do we not already sense that art can be something much more? Do we not already want to produce and observe aesthetic objects that, in some "objective" sense, add to the overall value of the world on their own?

Many of us are already aware of a more noble approach to art. As Scruton pointed out, there is a vast difference between how we approach a book of legal codes and a novel. If we could perfectly memorize all the information in the former, we would have no further use for it. The legal text is a mere tool for conveying information, and once it has aided us in achieving our goals, it can be discarded without loss. But the novel is different: despite having memorized all its conceptual contents, we often return to our favorite novels repeatedly. We take pleasure in the very process of reading a good novel, letting its story unfold over time, and savoring its mode of expression.



American Classroom
Wichita, KS



Wichita, KS

...The novel is not, as the textbook is, a mere tool, but a good in itself, something we value for its own sake. Put another way, we are interested in the novel itself, not merely in how the novel relates to us, or for its usefulness. The value of the novel is not purely a function of its external relations, whether those relations be its historical context or its power to stir up certain sentiments.

Generalizing from the novel, we might say that some artworks can stand on their own as objects worthy of love for their own sakes. In some sense, the aesthetic object can make demands upon us, provide us with reasons for loving it or taking interest in it, even if it does not directly appeal to our prior commitments. Sometimes we ought to love an artwork, even if we don't currently. In this way we can be said to grow to appreciate art, rather than merely change our likings. Our tastes can be said to mature, or develop for the better, towards some ideal, rather than merely shifting over time without direction. Only if we admit that, in some sense, artworks can be normatively, non-instrumentally good ends in themselves can we pretend to have anything more than arbitrary aesthetic preferences, directionless and guided primarily by cultural-historical forces outside of our control. Otherwise we must admit that there is no normatively significant difference between a lover of the arts and an aesthetically apathetic philistine. Sure, the former may be more emotionally mature, more open to their fellow man, to the natural world, etc just by caring more deeply about art. But when it comes to the artworks themselves, neither party is more justified than the other: the artworks themselves simply provide no reasons for the philistine to care about what the aesthete cares about. There would be nothing crude, cruel or petty about the attitude of the philistine in and of itself.

Working out a precise account of just how or why artworks can be truly worthy of love as ends in themselves, and not merely as tools, will probably be forever beyond us. Does the value stem from the artwork itself, or from a projection of the rational mind upon the artwork? What is the difference between an artwork being inherently worthy of non-utilitarian love, and merely worthy of non-utilitarian love (i.e. between inherent and final aesthetic value)? At the very least, our own tendencies to cherish certain aesthetic objects, to return to them repeatedly, and to feel justified frustration with those who fail to appreciate them like we do betrays a longing for our artworks to be finally valuable, worthy of love for their own sakes. I hope I have succeeded in producing at least one such object here.

P. A. Marks
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Bridgeport, OK



Copan, OK



Cushing, OK



Ponca City, OK



Grain Depot
Copan, OK



Ghost Hollow, OK



Ghost Hollow, OK



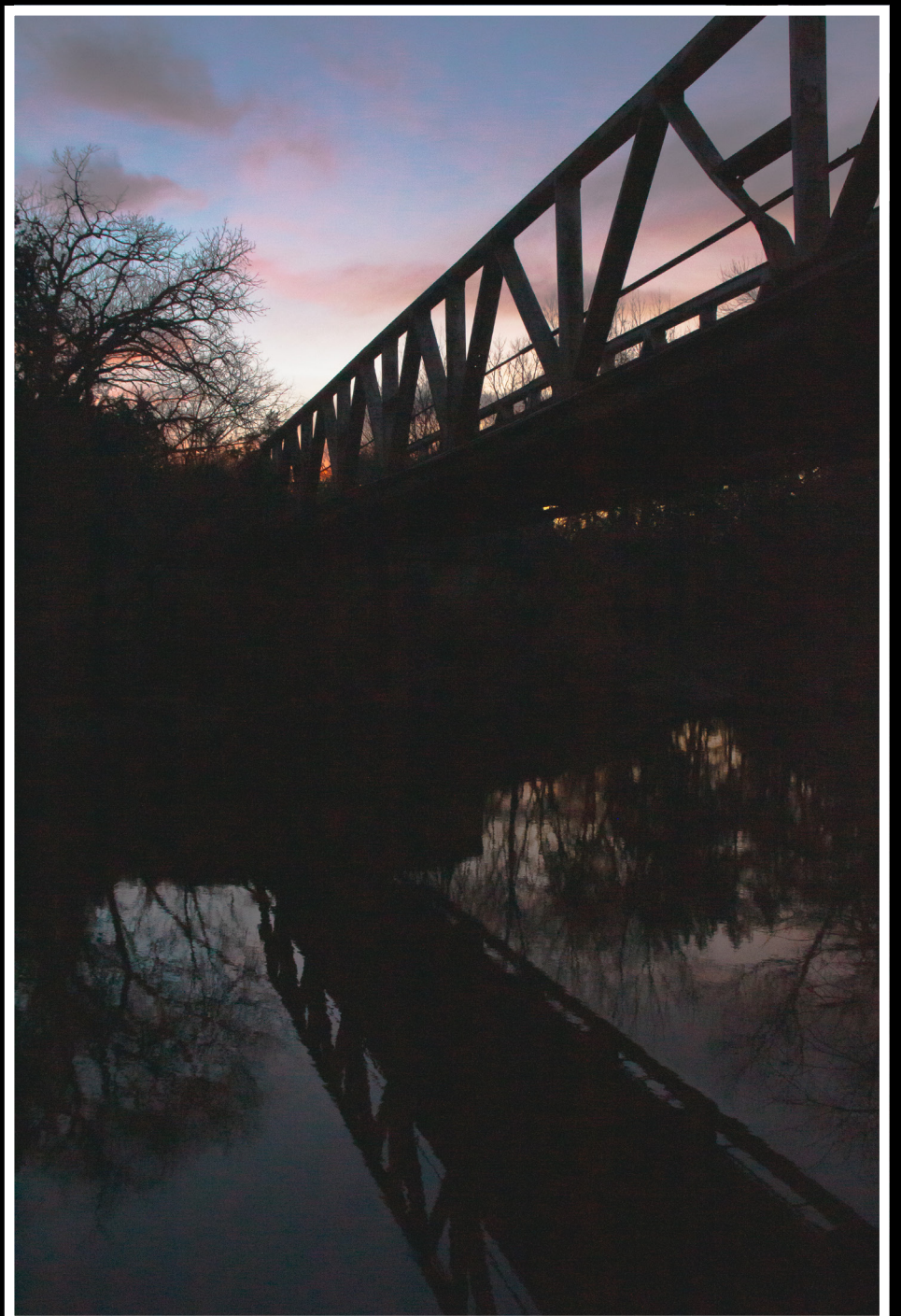
Pawhuska, OK



Copan, OK



Copan, OK



Ghost Hollow, OK



Bridgeport, OK



Copan, OK



No. 1: Art as Inherently Interesting

Music can captivate the ear in an instant; films are able to command attention through motion. But a still image, no matter how beautiful, is easy to overlook unless presented as something set apart from the ordinary. This photobook series is an attempt to liberate our view of photography from purely instrumentalist or hedonistic understandings. Each begins with a short essay on aesthetics, intended to frame the spirit of the pictures that follow.

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