

Objectivity and Subjectivity in Art

by John Gillis

Screwdrivers are subjective.

This should sound nonsensical to most people. After all a screwdriver is what it is – and isn't an arbitrary, non-real, shifting, fuzzy something-or-other.

But if screwdrivers are not open to arbitrary interpretation -- not subjective -- how does one answer the following:

1. that one could use it to pry open a can – thus is it really a can opener?.
 2. one could use it to kill an animal by stabbing – thus is it really a weapon?
 3. one could use it to scrape paint – thus is it a scraper?
 4. one could play a game of “spin the screwdriver” – so is it toy?
 5. one could prop open a locking door – so is it a door stop?
 6. one could grasp it by the blade and bang a nail with the handle – so is it a hammer?
- and so on.

Is the meaning, the definition, the identity, the nature of a screwdriver subjective? Since one needn't ever use it as an object that turns screws, are screwdrivers arbitrary? Yet most people would assure us that a screwdriver *is* a screwdriver.

Art works are subjective.

Most people would consider this statement true and uncontroversial. A few might be uncomfortable with it (especially Objectivists), but still feel it is likely or rings true. Our cultures,

present and past, and our use of language, reinforces this feeling that artworks are subjective -- subject to anyone's whim. This means they are *not* what they are -- they are subjective -- open to interpretation -- the Law of Identity doesn't apply.

We've all heard incessantly in our lives:

- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
- There's no accounting for taste.
- I *just* love it; I *just* hate it.
- That painting is pretty; That painting is hideous.
- That movie sucks; That movie is a transcendent filmic experience.

The above are common comments one hears (or thinks) regarding all sorts of artworks (often the same work) – and they all “validate” the subjectivity of art. But as you will see as we work through various ways that people emotionally or off-handedly talk about the arts and their reactions to them, there are explanations for all human reactions to art works. The goal here is to understand, logically and emotionally, that both of those statements above about the subjectivity of screwdrivers and artworks, *are absolutely false and nonsensical*.

It is largely because of the emotional and psychological complexity of esthetic reactions, that mankind still believes that such reactions are inexplicable. To put the intellectual state of affairs of esthetics in perspective, consider, for example, the histories of physics and medicine.

Ideas about the physical world *had been* completely subjective and confused over millennia. From Greek gods that moved the sun or the oceans, to spontaneous generation of animals, to volcanoes as the wrath of angry gods, to spirits that could leave bodies, to quantum effects as “proof” of the lack of causation in the universe -- the history of physics (and metaphysics) is full of arbitrary, useless and dangerous “explanations”. No one grasped how the physical world really is structured, how things move, how force and energy work, until realistic intellectuals showed the way. Copernicus and Galileo, for example, presented their astronomical and physical discoveries and changed our world view. And Sir Isaac Newton finally put mankind on a true scientific footing when he developed his revolutionary tool of the calculus, combined with his comprehensive theory of physics.

Esthetically, we are in a primitive intellectual world in which the nature of the art experience is seen as arbitrary and capricious.

Ideas about how the human body worked and other flora and fauna worked, was once completely subjective and confused. The human body was shrouded in deep ignorance which left wide openings for mysticism, faith healing, charlatanry, and other abominations. From blood-letting, to horrific poisons given as “purgatives” and “cures”, to magic spells for cure, to praying to god for relief, to many contemporary vitamin and supplement “cures”, the world has been full of arbitrary, subjective, worthless misinformation that has led to untold suffering and death. This historical state of affairs largely arose from mankind’s ignorance of logical method and empirical principles of research, but also because the body was seen as inherently too complex or the province of God – so no study was possible. After the small successes in Greco/Roman times, mankind had to wait

for the Renaissance, when a series of brilliant pioneers such as Harvey, Vesalius, Pasteur, Lister, Roentgen, Long/Morton/Simpson (pioneers of anesthesia), and a long list of others – who concretely worked out the anatomical, biomechanical, hydraulic, neurological and electrical systems of the body, and discovered techniques for conquering disease and pain.

In the realm of esthetics, we are still in that primitive world -- but we needn't stay there. It will probably take a series of brilliant, objective thinkers and researchers to move esthetics and art psychology towards a fuller understanding of human reactions to artworks. But first mankind must think it is possible! If it is considered philosophically untenable, it will be impossible for it to happen.

This intellectual state of affairs -- artwork perceived as subjective; screwdrivers (or coffee cups, or trees, or planets) perceived as objective, (or at least not subjective) -- is what must be destroyed in order to realize the full potential of Ayn Rand's esthetic theory.

FACTUAL PERSPECTIVE

To start this analysis of the various meanings that have been used for objective and subjective, I've constructed a set of fictitious descriptions of concrete reactions to specific works by various fictional people (I call these descriptions "Scenes"). These descriptions will help keep this essay concrete and specific. The history of art theory writing shows it is all too easy for a discussion of esthetics to soar into disconnected abstraction, and end up being untested and ungrounded against

experiences in the arts. Since the arts are perceptual, these descriptions will help focus the discussion at certain points. ¹

Once these Scenes are described, we'll get onto the business of analysis and commentary identifying when and how it is sensible to speak of "objectivity" in art, and when not.

Scene "A"

Florence, Italy, Accademia Gallery:

Seven people standing in front of the oversized, nude male statue, *David* by Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Here are the viewers' first reactions (though not in so many words -- just emotional reactions):

1. Strength, a peculiar serenity as from an inner vision, determination, the will to triumph, -- thrilling, makes me feel I can rise to any challenge.
2. Overblown, unreal, ridiculous. This is not the way life is.
3. Great body, I'd love to have a husband with a body like that.
4. Obscene, exposed private parts, disgusting, anti-Christian.
5. Another one of these oversized marble statues. I'm starving; when will this tour be over.
6. What great skill -- to be able to cut unyielding marble with such precision, a palpable flesh texture that is alive and pulsing, such three dimensional compositional complexity of the body -- a magnificent work.
7. Reminds me of that all-time football star from Notre Dame, has the same eyebrows and ear lobes. Impressive. I like it.

Scene "B"

Stratford-on-Avon, England.

Seven people watching a performance of *Henry V*, by Shakespeare.

Here are their reactions half way through (though not in so many words -- just emotional reactions):

1. Swept away by the majesty and determination of this king to claim what is his, and willing to fight against all odds for what he believes is right. Poetic and entrancing.
2. The language is too sweet, too rich and the acting is overblown and self-important. Affecting in its way, but the world doesn't work this way.
3. Another killer king, will do anything for power; well-acted & written, but abhorrent and painful to watch.
4. What richly detailed scenery and sumptuous costumes, I could watch it over and over.
5. What language are they speaking, I can't make out all these strange words and phrases. Why can't they use regular English? I'm bored.
6. The language! It flows as an incoming Caribbean tide -- inexorable, warm, welcoming, delightful.
7. Henry's use of military strategy is mixed. Sometimes he is brilliant, other times clearly an amateur. But overall, realistic. I like it.

Scene "C"

Bear Run, Pennsylvania.

Seven people walking through the residence *Fallingwater* by Frank Lloyd Wright.

Here are the viewers first reactions (though not in so many words -- just emotional reactions):

1. Every step shows some new part of the space, yet every previous step lingers in my mind, all connected as if time were a single entity. The rooms are so expansive, yet comfortable and enveloping. I'd love to live in a world with houses like this.
2. Everything is so cutely related, its obsessive and overly romantic. I would go crazy here. Everywhere you look there are the same patterns -- it's too consistent, too pat -- nothing incongruous to make one laugh.
3. Looks too expensive, I could buy a house of the same size for half of what this must have cost.
4. What nice, environmentally friendly materials: stone, brick, cork, wood. This is the way people should live -- close to natural things.
5. Too cold looking -- stone floors, hardwood, exposed brick. Give me wall-to-wall carpet anytime, and not so many windows -- too bright.
6. What skill -- in Wright's manipulation of formal elements -- his juxtaposition of light & dark, his integrating of different materials, his skill of functional fulfillment. What a work of architecture.
7. Wright really knew how to exploit materials. Look at that span of concrete, that mass of stone supporting the cantilevers, that weightless vertical element. The construction techniques are brilliant. I like it.

This is a taste of the countless examples that all of us have seen and heard about many artworks. It is data such as these 21 comments above that constitutes the “evidence” for the inherent subjectivity, arbitrariness and unpredictability of art and the art experience. What sense does it make to talk about art as an objective experience, in the face of the limitless variability of people and their hot and cold or indifferent attitudes towards any given artwork?

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

If one is still inclined, in the face of all these variable reactions to think that art should somehow be rational, or objectively explainable -- there is a chorus of the biggest names in the history of philosophy that reinforce this subjective reading of the evidence. For example:

David Hume, one of the earliest modern philosophers to have a treatise on esthetic matters (*Of the Standard of Taste*, Hume 1998),² said, in summary, that beauty is obviously not in the object itself (since everyone disagrees about what is beautiful), thus beauty is and must be subjective -- just the whim of the beholder. Beauty is unreal, as Hume believed that sweetness or bitterness is unreal. (He was wrong about those as well.)

Immanuel Kant, the first modern philosopher to make esthetics a major branch of his philosophy (although early on he denied esthetics was important) made many contradictory claims about art, beauty, taste, sublimity, etc. But after sifting through his mix of conflicting ideas one finds his central arguments are: a) that art is entirely in one's mind, and b) art has nothing to do with our sense organs.³

Tolstoy, in his influential book, *What is Art?* (Tolstoy 1995) said that one can either view beauty in art as mystical ("intrinsic" to the art object, in Objectivist terms) or subjective. He chose the latter, insisting that most of his own previous work, and the majority of all other artists' work was non-art. Why? Because their work fell into the intrinsic camp, i.e., created on the idea that the beauty was

in the object itself. (He further claimed all those works were non-art because they were immoral, since they had non-Christian or anti-Christian themes, but that's another story.)

In the twentieth century, virtually any mainstream philosopher and esthetician would not consider the subject of objectivity open to discussion. They take it to be self-evident (if anything can be self-evident for modern philosophers) that one cannot discuss art works and art experience in a rational, objective way. ⁴

OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

The idea of artworks being subjective and art experience being subjective revolves around the many confused meanings that "subjectivity" has had throughout intellectual and cultural history, and is probably as misunderstood as the concept of "art" itself.

To be *objective* is to use a certain cognitive method that results in identifying a fact. Objectivity has two components:

- A. that one's mental content conforms to fact, and
- B. One uses the method required by the nature of human consciousness.

To be *non-objective*, or *subjective*, is to use some other method, such as avoiding a fact crucial to a chain of reasoning, or not using a logical method to organize the facts observed.

In its fundamental meaning "objectivity" is a relation between existence and consciousness, namely when a mind grasps a fact about reality. Objectivity is a state or condition of a human mind – not, strictly speaking, the property of a thing (such as an artwork or screwdriver).

These descriptions of objectivity and subjectivity are straightforward in Objectivist theory. But people split quickly into two camps on the question of whether our actions and experiences in the world can be objective, or must be inevitably subjective.

Part of the vast confusion that permeates this subject is that the terms "objective" and "subjective" are applied to very different vantage points of the art enterprise. This paper outlines the ways people apply and misapply those two concepts to the several vantage points of the art experience.

These *vantage points* are:

1. the beholder's perspective [the person experiencing the artwork] whether visually, aurally, mentally, etc.,
2. the artist's act of creation,
3. the concrete art-product itself (whether it be a play, a painting, a musical composition, a novel, a building, a dance, etc.), and
4. a critical perspective, (whether as a professional critic or an "art-consumer" trying to make an objective evaluation of the work).

1. BEHOLDING (experiencing)

The beholder's ⁵ perspective is certainly the central way in which people talk about the subjectivity of art. What is specifically meant is the *variability*, the *relativity* of people's responses to the same

work of art, or the changes that the same person might go through when looking at the same work at different times. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Here are the main instances of how the concept of "objectivity" and "subjectivity" apply.

- A. On a literal, *perceptual level*, the event of a person perceiving an artwork (whether visual, literary, dramatic, musical, etc.) can be objective, since in its basic sense "to be objective" simply means grasping the nature of the work you are mentally focused on. Surely people agree that the work in front of them is, e.g., a marble statue of a man, a marble statue of a man with an healthy, fit human body, a marble statue of a man with an healthy, fit body with a sling shot, a marble statue of a man with an healthy, fit human body with a sling shot who looks grimly determined. A statue made of stone produced by an expert stonecutter. These are all facts one can observe about the work, and if someone disagrees or misses a fact, someone can point it out, and they will usually agree. If the work is so unclear that there is a lot of debate about the perceptual facts, then we have probably left the realm of art or any possible objective communication.
- B. On an *emotional level*, the immediate emotional reaction (positive or negative) to a work (or lack of emotional reaction) is most frequently pointed to as proving the subjectivity of the art response. But one must ask: In what sense, if any, does the concept of "objectivity" apply to this emotional valuation?
1. In the philosophical sense, objectivity is a concept that refers to a cognitive method, that results in an identification of a fact of reality. But we are now considering an automatic evaluative aspect of our minds, i.e., how do I value this statue of a man that I've just objectively grasped? It doesn't make any sense to talk about the

"objectivity" of your emotional reaction in this context, since it is a category mistake to do so. Emotion is not cognition. One's evaluations, on an emotional level (i.e., automatic), are consequences of a great many aspects of your inner life, of your whole psyche, and are not a cognitive method.

2. Loosely speaking, one could speak of having a non-objective emotional reaction: if you misperceived the overall work. For example, you focused primarily on an unimportant aspect, such as his hair style to the exclusion of all other features of the work), or you made a lightning perceptual judgment of the work that was irrelevant (e.g., that a nude male body with a visible penis is so disturbing to your sexually repressive religious views that you can't grasp the work qua artwork -- only as a dangerous or exciting erotic object). In these examples it is not the emotion that is literally non-objective, but the earlier step, the "perceptual judgment" as Kelley calls it (Kelley 1986) of an incorrect cognitive method in identifying what the central features of the artwork are. In this second example, the beholder is using a sexual criterion to determine your emotional reaction, instead of reacting to what the work factually *is* --a marble statue of a man with an healthy, fit human body with a sling shot, who looks grimly determined.
- C. On a *perceptual level* again, a source of "subjectivity" is caused by the artist, in what I call The Bungled Work Syndrome. Usually, the clearer the work of art, the easier it is to agree on what it means (although a great work can be stunningly complex because of its multiple themes and layers of meaning). The more ambiguous an artwork is, the more interpretations and questions it raises in the beholders' minds. Mediocre or poor quality art breeds the idea of subjectivity in one's mind, because so many doubts and questions arise

when you experience it and as you reflect upon it. And if one is unable to shake the questions, then conflicts can occur among people over the "real" meaning. The source of this subjectivity is that the work itself has unresolved or inappropriate conflicts, or is bungled – and doesn't present a clear slice of the artist's metaphysical view of the world. Although bungled works abound throughout history, the 20th century has institutionalized it in the form of many works by Picasso (painting), Stravinsky (music), John O'hara (fiction), Henry Moore (sculpture) and many lesser lights in all art fields.

D. On a *psychological or psycho-epistemological level*, there is what I call the Forest v. Trees syndrome. There is an unlimited capacity for a person to focus on unessential aspects of a work, which for one reason or another are important to that person. These secondary aspects can be important to the greatness of an artwork, but they aren't the center of the artwork. Some of the examples given at the beginning of this paper show the way people can lose sight of (or never have sight of) the work in front of them as an artwork. Instead, they dwell on some journalistic detail of the work, or they focus solely on the craft expertise exhibited (the quality of the costumes, the skill at engineering, the skill of word use, etc.) The three Scenes detailed earlier have some examples of this syndrome -- see A7, B4, B7, C3, C4 (and parts of other instances). Connoisseurs sometimes fall into this trap. I believe that some connoisseurs of art have little or no experience of true esthetic emotion. Instead, they obtain intense pleasures from the skill, craftsmanship, and design aspects of a work of art -- and none from the metaphysical values expressed in the work. This condition, if common, would help explain why people can rhapsodize quite genuinely about paintings, or vases, or drawings, or concertos, or novels whose content may be alien to their own values, but have qualities of skill that are much more important to that beholder. We must realize

that that kind of art-consumer isn't an art-consumer (one who responds to the metaphysical values presented by the artist), but a *craft-consumer*.

1. The first steps of any art experience (except music perhaps) are the perceptual grasp and identification of the work. However, the identification that one makes can be unrelated to the artwork *as* an artwork. For example, if one focuses only on the craft of the artist (see A6, B6, C6 above – the pure “connoisseur” examples), one is not grasping it as an artwork but as a craftwork. Thus, metaphorically, one's emotional evaluation is subjective, since one is not evaluating it for what it is, an artwork, but for some other aspect of it. Or, if you love a play of Shakespeare's solely for its beautiful language, and if you then evaluate it as a great artwork, you are mistakenly equating superb skill in language with the quite separate issue of the dramatic abilities of the playwright to create a worldview. (Of course, a great play is both a great drama and a great work of language, but if one exclusively claims that it is a great artwork because of the language alone that is not what art-writing is.)

E. On a *semantic/language level*, people mistakenly ascribe to "subjectivity" the meaning of "optional" or "personal", thus unpredictable. And certainly most art responses of people are personal and not frequently predictable. This phenomenon isn't a sign of some a-rational realm of the human mind, but arises from many aspects of human psychology. People do have different moods and respond to a given work in different ways. For example, if you have had a harrowing week of work, fraught with uncertainty, too many problems to solve, too many variables to consider -- then you might react badly to a dynamic, complex, demanding symphony that you normally love. Your mind needs (perhaps in this case) a

well-ordered, relatively simple musical line of a Vivaldi concerto to bring it back into balance and calm.

Since we are beings of free will and highly varying experience, our states of mind change significantly from time to time (within a range, of course). As long as a person can introspect, he can observe his state of mind and see there is a rational relation between his response to an artwork and his general emotional state. The fact that an outside observer cannot predict this person's reaction isn't a sign that his reaction is subjective (with its connotations of irrational, arbitrary), just that some information is not available directly to an outside observer.

Perhaps at some future time, when we have a science of psychology, people will have the intellectual and introspective tools to easily distinguish why this week his reaction to a CD of his favorite opera star performing his favorite aria did not get a rise out of him, but the month before moved him deeply, as usual. Of course, many times now, even without a science of psychology, a good introspector can tell that there is one or more factors that directly bear upon the difference in reaction to a given artwork.

Before going on to the next (second) *vantage point*, let's clarify, by referencing a different field entirely, the confusion of what *subjectivity* is. The Austrian School of economics uses "subjectivity" to describe human economic behavior. Their view stems from mistakenly equating the fact that people have individual values and free will, with arbitrariness and unpredictability. They are observing a true condition: that neither the government nor anyone else can know the myriad values of all the people at all times in an economy. But the Austrians, rather than simply accepting this as a fact that flows from the nature of free will, taint human action with the brush of

subjectivity; they imply that one's choice of values are by their nature, arbitrary and irrational, at least from a sociological perspective. Yet when they speak of subjectivity, they are speaking of the rational actions of a brilliant CEO, or the implacable calculations of a technologist, or the commonsense of a person shopping at a food market. To call such thoughts and actions as subjective is at least misleading, and actually amounts to a smear.

II. ACTING (The artist's act of creation)

A. The artist himself: There is a tradition throughout the history of esthetics to regard the artist as being driven by some irrational urge to create his artworks. The Muse "possessed" artists in Greco-Roman days. The process of creation of art was considered closed to any rational inspection, and thus highly subjective. This view has been reinforced by artists, since most were operating on an intuitive, craft-oriented, non-verbal basis. They rarely shed any light on the cognitive and emotional process of creating their work. Most artists didn't have a conscious idea of why they were impelled to make artworks, so they considered their work and themselves as non-objective, purely emotional.

In recent centuries, the Muse has been dropped, but otherwise the process of artistic creation is as internal and untouched by rational analysis as it ever was. There have been isolated art philosophers,⁶ some in the 17th & 18th centuries and some in the last century who subscribed to some level of a Realist view of the artistic process, and who had psychological theories trying to explain the way art is produced. While some of these efforts have been useful, they have been largely overshadowed by the prevailing view that the artistic mind is a black hole of inspiration: if

you try to peer inside it, it is just an unknowable void. And given the state of psychology, this perspective is the default view.

B. The issue of methodology: The complexity of the artistic process, and its major differences from medium to medium makes the development of objective studies of plays, painting, music, architecture, dance, sculpture, novels, poetry and all the rest, extraordinarily difficult. Because every art form requires analysis on its own terms, based on the essential qualities of its medium, it is easy for a subjectivist to say that one can't reduce this or that artistic process to some group of principles and standards. But an objective approach will start with the characteristics of the medium itself, and with human psychology and perception. Then one can apply the results of such studies to the works that display the unlimited inventive skills of the world's artists.

Added to the complexity of the artist's process is the fact that much of the time during the creation of a work, an artist is and must work on the subconscious level. It takes a remarkably self-aware artist, with a commitment to rational thought, to elicit from his own experience the true events that take place during his creative effort. The rarity of such artists is part of the reason we have so few coherent studies of the artistic process. Further, the very act of creation is, as far as I can tell, a psychological time when one cannot be primarily consciously aware of what one is doing, because the artist is running his huge subconscious engine to feed contextually appropriate decisions and insights into his work moment by moment for hours on end.⁷

C. The meaning of objectivity in the act of creation. Objectivity should refer to at least two aspects: 1) that the metaphysical view the artist wants to express is coherent, so he results in an objective communication with his audience, 2) the artist uses a correct cognitive process (much

involving his subconscious) in determining the best tools of his medium to accomplish the emotional effects he is aiming at.

1. The Vision: If the artist doesn't have a clear idea of what he wants to accomplish in the work he is about to make, then his subconscious (upon which he must depend for all his past knowledge and experiential data) will have unclear signals, and probably result in unclear, non-objective results. Many artists create many works throughout their lives, but most such works are craftwork, not artwork. For the very reason that most artists have not made clear to themselves what they wanted to accomplish, and thus didn't create a work with a clear vision of the world he wants to present. Whether it be the hopelessness of heroic struggle (Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*), or the tragic, deterministic clashes of people (Prokofiev's ballet music for *Romeo and Juliet*), or the unlimited power of the human will to protect one's life and one's loves as in (Michael Caton-Jones' film, *Rob Roy*), or the transcendent power of virginal purity (Titian in his *The Assumption of the Virgin* in Venice), or the 'Valhalla', the heaven on this earth, made of lithe concrete and glass, (Wright's *Johnson Wax Building* in Racine, Wisconsin) – each artist has to make an unambiguous statement in his medium to transmit his vision of the world.
2. The artistic creative process is worth several volumes and there has been good work done by contemporary psychologists. How much of it is conscious, subconscious, emotional is unclear, and probably varies with the artist and the medium -- some having one style of mental and emotional processing, and others having a very different mix of mental methods. Only when the idea that the artistic process is explainable, converts from a minority view to a widely held view, will we see significant progress among

psychologists in showing more details of how the process works. Then the inchoate mass of artistic methods will start to be individually clarified.

III. The ARTWORK (itself)

A. Objectivity in the work itself: It's common in our century to speak of a non-objective painting or sculpture, or sometimes a non-objective novel (James Joyce's work is a "good" example).

Strictly speaking, objectivity as understood in Objectivism, is an attribute of a cognitive process, of a consciousness. So in what sense is an object, a concrete product, such as a painting, a musical composition, a novel, a work of architecture, "non-objective"?

1. In the *visual arts*, the term "non-objective" means there is no subject in the work. It results in the work (paint on canvas, sculpted clay, ink on paper, etc.) lacking one of the essential features of an artwork: a means of communication -- the subject matter. So, it makes some sense that this kind of work is called "non-objective", since to attempt to communicate without having content (subject matter) is non-objective communication. Examples in painting: the "cubes" that Picasso's Cubism disintegrates reality into, or the incoherent lines and shapes of Kandinsky's nonrepresentationalism. Conversely, one can speak of a work as being "objective", by extension, if an artist used cognitive (conscious and subconscious) processes that succeed in getting across his desired "message", his vision, (his fundamental view of the way the world is). It's reasonable that, if an artist uses all the skills and facts available to him to accomplish his goal of communicating some crucial view of the world as he sees it, one can ascribe "objectivity" to that complete process -- and to the art product itself which is the

medium of communication of his metaphysical views. In this way, a concrete, the artwork, can be called "objective", because it is the result of an objective mental process. But still do not confuse this derivative use of "objective" and "subjective" with the key meaning outlined in the "Beholding" section above.

2. In *novels*, if one "writes" in non-existent words, that are undefined, or one strings together real words but in nonsensical arrangements that defy grammar or meaning, then it is appropriate to call such a work "non-objective". Examples: Joyce's *Ulysses* or Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*. Conversely, literature is so clearly a medium of communication, objectivity is easily ascribed to the product of the writer's efforts, if he has written with clarity of his own purpose, and with awareness of the best techniques to instill his vision in the reader's mind. Examples: need I mention to this audience, Ayn Rand's fiction? – or good but less deep novels by Nevil Shute or Agatha Christie.
3. *Music*, even though the most difficult art to understand because of its apparently deep connections with our neurological subsystems and perceptual and proprioceptive systems, still has applicable "objectivity". If the music is without order (rhythmic, tonal, melodic, etc.), then the opportunity for transmitting a musical world view is diminished or eliminated. If there is perceptual consistency and regularity, at least one can say that it is possible to communicate certain musical structures that regularly and consistently cause listeners to react with a common emotional condition.
4. In *architecture*, objectivity arises from the relation between the structure, the functions and the spaces and forms. The structure should be visually consistent with the functions. The spaces and forms should be visually consistent with the structure. All of

this is what is called “integrity” in architectural design, but in a wide sense is “objectivity”, which means here that the building’s essential features are consistent with the facts of reality (function and structure) and created by a logical method. Examples: Louis Sullivan’s Midwestern banks (pick almost any of them) or Wright’s *Johnson Wax Building*. Conversely, if a work has disorganized, anti-geometric shapes and spaces, and materials that are clearly disconnected from the structure and functions, then it will be unable to be integrated by a viewer, and tend toward subjectivity. Examples: Frank Gehry’s *Bilbao Museum* or Peter Eisenman’s *Wexner Center at Ohio State University*.

Each of the above paragraphs can be a long essay itself, and one could do the same long or short analysis in ballet, theater, opera, landscape architecture, poetry, etc.

In all the arts, the product is the means, the medium, the vehicle by which objective communication can take place, but only if both the artist and the beholder respectively use objective mental methods to create the work and to grasp the artwork.

IV. CRITICIZING (either a professional critic, or a beholder switching perspectives to that of critic.)

A. Objectivity in the evaluation of an artwork *as* an artwork, is much better understood, at least intuitively, compared to the many meanings and confusions discussed above. In Objectivism, it refers to the use of a consistent and rational method of evaluating an artwork by 1) standards derived from the capacities of the medium of the artwork, and 2) by the metaphysical intention of

the artist. Being an objective critic requires the exclusion of your own emotional reaction to the work while you are examining the work's success as an artwork in a specific medium.

Throughout the twentieth century the trend accelerated in which most critics and theorists of art abandoned the idea of "objectivity" in art criticism. What chance did art criticism have, given that in the related field of journalism objectivity had been largely been lost? If modern intellectuals can't see the value of objectivity in journalism, they certainly won't be looking for it in the much more complex field of esthetic criticism.

1. Intention or Theme or Meaning: When trying to evaluate an artwork objectively, determining the theme or themes in a work can be difficult. Since the theme is an abstraction that one has to obtain by a process of induction, it is open to more argument and debate than the straightforward description of what one is directly beholding.⁸

(Generally, the inductive process that leads to understanding the theme of a work, will also lead to the artist's intention, since they are the same, but worded somewhat differently.) To put the problems of accurate thematic art analysis in perspective, take note of how the physical sciences work.

- a. They are largely inductive (gathering data and drawing a conclusion);
- b. there is often a vast amount of data on a given subject;
- c. this data is supplied by different scientists using varying methodologies.

As a result, there are frequent, fierce debates in the scientific journals over the quality of the evidence, the amount of evidence, its relevance, etc. Scientific debates are eventually resolved with more data and better analysis, but the process can take much time, effort and thought. But physics is not generally considered subjective (except by some modern critics, notably Kuhn and Feyerabend.)

There are substantial differences between the detailed methods of scientists and art critics, arising from the different parts of reality they are analyzing, but the underlying inductive process should be similar. One difference worth noting between art and science is that in art a work can be bungled, i.e., unclear, ambiguous in meaning, contradictory, while in science, the "work" is reality, so it just *is*, it cannot be contradictory. This fact makes art criticism harder, since the unclarity in meaning in a work can make it impossible for people to agree on what is "in" the work. But even here, one can recognize that fact of unclarity, and declare it a poor artwork (or no art at all), and admit that no clear answer is available about this artwork. So in an important way, an art critic must be more ruthlessly objective than a scientist since his subject matter is more complex. Leaving aside this problem of bungled artwork (though it is common), if people discuss the work from a common commitment to rational discourse, they will eventually come to the same conclusion about the theme in the work, at least as much as in any other field of human study, whether it be the understanding of the components of atoms, the reliability of a building structural system, or the cheapest method for producing copper. Many differences of analysis can be resolved by referring to the facts of the work. Each conflicting party can point to those facts that justify their view that the central theme is such and such. As in most human endeavors – whether physics lab or courtroom or art critic's armchair, some cases are easy, some are confusing and mixed, and some are really hard. We just must recognize that thinking about art is, in principle, just another scientific study as are all other human cognitive action, whether it is the science of cooking food,

the science of astronomy, the science of building stability, or the science of ballet criticism.⁹

2. Standards of evaluation:

There is a large body of knowledge about techniques and principles operative in each field of art that can be amassed, to assist the rationally oriented beholder or professional critic to best judge a given work. Some principles and techniques have been set down by this critic or that theorist,¹⁰ but there is much to be done to organize and explain the various factors to consider in the objective evaluation of an artwork.

3. Originality vs. "fixed" principles of evaluation: Much of one's art responses occur on a subconscious level, and thus ferreting out why something is profoundly affecting is difficult. Matters are made worse by the fact that great artists occasionally create artworks that fall outside traditional analysis in any given art form. These conditions challenge even rational, knowledgeable critics to see the work as it really is, and not to deny its greatness because it violates the "rules" or conventions. Principles or standards of evaluation are contextual -- and a new insight can change the context. This kind of rule "violation" isn't a violation. It is the discovery of a new way, a new technique that isn't good because it's new, but is good because it gives a more potent esthetic experience. The objective critic has to acknowledge this new insight of what can be done in the medium, and add this new "wrinkle" to the repertoire of that art form. For example: in painting and sculpture there were many innovations over centuries, away from frontal, two-dimensional figures towards a more realistic, fully formed presentation of objects and people. Many of these steps were striking violations of the norm, but because they

provided the artist the opportunity to communicate more about the character of his subjects, such innovations became common as other artists copied and built upon the innovators' pictorial inventions. Or in Western music, the movement from simpler forms of composition (such as Renaissance motets) to the radical work of Bach, and then Beethoven and Mozart, and other later composers, resulted in the rich instrumental, symphonic, operatic forms we enjoy today.

ART AS AN OBJECTIVE ENTERPRISE

What do we *now* make of the 21 examples (in the three Scenes) at the beginning of this essay, supposedly showing the “subjectivity” of art works and experience? With the detailed teasing out of the various package deals and mistaken meanings of “objectivity” and “subjectivity”, we could, with close attention to detail and as much human psychological insight as one might muster, explain away the apparent support for the subjective thesis about art that these examples collectively purport to provide. To do this for all the 21 examples, would take another large essay. Let's just review them in a simple way, and leave the rest of the task to those who want to flex their “objectivity detection” muscles a little more:

Scene “A”: Michelangelo's *David*.

Clearly beholders 1 and 2 hold opposite senses of what life should be like....

No. 1 takes the facts visually presented and judges them good, i.e., the presentation of a strong, determined, perfectly formed man *is* a striking affirmation of how that beholder wants the world to be.

No. 2 takes the facts presented and judges them as bad, i.e., interprets the strong, determined perfectly formed man as what the beholder does not believe are the relevant, important features of the world – that is a false picture of the world, thus “overblown and unreal”.

No. 3 takes the facts presented and reacts concretely, rather than universally – and only can judge the statue narcissistically and physicalistically in the form “I’d like to get a man with a body like that” (speaking as a woman). She misses the nature of the esthetic experience – the concrete perceptual presentation of a world-view, or a character that epitomizes such a world-view.

No. 4 takes the facts presented and applies his extreme religious antipathy to the human nude at hand, and similarly to no. 3 cannot have an esthetic experience – but rather has a primarily moral experience – one of approbation. (Another opposite variant, 4A one might call it, could be a nudist activist, who could similarly have no esthetic reaction, but a reaction only consisting of his moral approval of a forthright nude figure, missing the point entirely of the statue’s reason-for-being.)

No. 5 is one of those profoundly anti-artistic, concrete-level minds that is trapped in the convention of a tourist bus schlepping from one “must-see” cultural point to another. This is interminable for the person trapped in this cultural “hell” – and his tendency will be not even to see what is in front of him in the sense of processing the perceptual inputs in order to identify what is there (i.e, to not focus his mind in any meaningful way). For him the event will largely disappear from his mind as soon as he walks out the room.

No. 6 takes the facts presented and tries his best *not* to automatically or consciously evaluate what is in front of him. Instead he focuses on technical issues, as an engineer might “objectively” evaluate the performance of a motor. All the statements are simply descriptions of the qualities of the work, without the meaning. This is the technique of some connoisseurs who are not really having an esthetic experience but a purely descriptive experience with little or no emotion.

No. 7 takes the facts presented, and irrelevantly focuses on details, missing the meaning -- the theme. To say you like a work, but give as its reason, some small aspect, such features of his hair or clothing or texture, is not as esthetic reaction, but a profound ability to disregard the whole context and stick to safe, pleasant (or unpleasant) aspects. (This interpretation in no way means one cannot look at things in this connoisseur-like way, but hopefully, only as an adjunct to a full emotional esthetic reaction – whether an emotion of love or one of hatred for the artwork.)

These quick sketches of the variety of seven experiences leave much more that can be said about each. And a similar analysis can be made of the Scene “B” – Shakespeare examples, and the Scene “C” - Wright examples.

The point of looking at this variety of reactions to a single work is that none of the reactions, properly put in perspective, are necessarily mysterious, mystical, unexplainable or candidates for the X-files. The fact that people will differ in their emotional responses to the same artworks does not mean they are acting, or are being subjective. That concept is grossly misapplied to the arts, and for the sake of humanity’s conceptual sanity, should be banned from civil discourse.

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So, are artworks and screwdrivers subjective?

No and no, obviously. It is a mistake to ascribe “subjectivity” to such objects.

And are beholders emotional reactions subjective? No again. At least in any important, accurate use of the concepts “subjective” and “objective.”

The understanding that the arts must be an objective enterprise is crucial to the Objectivist philosophy. For if it were true that some part of human experience was necessarily, metaphysically subjective, then Objectivism would have to collapse. And conversely, if Objectivism is a true philosophy, then the arts, this important human endeavor, must be able to be part of this universe of

objectivity. Ayn Rand provided an enormous epistemological, metaphysical and psychological underpinning to a new esthetic theory, as well as the outlines of the theory itself. A key step out of the swamp of subjectivity that esthetics has inhabited all these centuries is to acknowledge, embrace and glory in the objectivity of the art experience. As we reach the summit of this discussion – the edge of this new promised land of esthetic rationality, it may be best to paraphrase Neil Armstrong arriving on the moon’s surface: *This is one small step for a man; from a giant leap by Ayn Rand.*

** ** END ** **

¹ It would be an added benefit if all readers were “forced” to actually experience these artworks being discussed, but that not being a reasonable option – the descriptions have to do. However, I can highly recommend vacations that include visits to Renaissance Italy, to Shakespearean England and Wrightian America.

² “Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. To seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an inquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real sweet or real bitter. According to the disposition of the organs, the same object may be both sweet and bitter; and the proverb has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes. It is very natural, and even quite necessary, to extend this axiom to mental, as well as bodily taste; and thus common sense, which is so often at variance with philosophy, especially with the sceptical kind, is found, in one instance at least, to agree in pronouncing the same decision.” Hume 1998.

³ As a good place to review Kant's positions about the subjectivity of art, see the section on Kant's aesthetics in Beardsley 1966. He gives good overviews of Kant's positions – without having to work through Kant's often unclear and always turgid prose.

⁴ I'm not suggesting that philosophers do not discuss what "objectivity", "subjectivity", "intersubjectivity", etc. are. But these controversies are much more analytical and epistemological, not usually about the possibility of objectivity (as to be defined here) in aesthetics.

⁵ I am using "beholder" for: viewer, listener, inhabitant, reader, etc. This is the best English word I have found to cover all the fields of art without biasing the discussion toward the visual arts (by using "viewer") or some other category of artworks.

⁶ E.g., see Reid 1971; Smith 1982; Alison 1811; Raymond 1921; Koestler 1964

⁷ One shining example of a very conscious artist is in the audio tapes of Ayn Rand's Fiction writing lectures (Rand 1994). These are invaluable because of her clear discussions of her own mental processes when writing novels.

⁸ Example: David by Michelangelo: It is indisputable that it is a sculpture of a man, a man with a slingshot, a man of a certain age and strength, a man clearly concerned about something. But that the sculpture is presenting the moment of an important decision (to attack Goliath), of choosing with an unswerving determination to attack the giant, is not perceptually there.

⁹ The methodology in each field of art that will lead to a correct identification of the intent of the artist and the theme of the work, has almost never been discussed in the Objectivist literature including by Ayn Rand. The most valuable source of information on themes is AR's many comments and identifications in her fiction-writing course on tape. But even here there is no real discussion of how one proceeds down the necessary methodological inductive path. This is a major area of study waiting for answers.

¹⁰ Two books that come to mind immediately are *This is Music* (Randolph 1964) and *The Romantic Manifesto* (Rand 1969).