

# Are we Art Lovers?

by Friedrich Kisters, Swiss based art historian

If we are Art lovers, do we know what Art is? Well, it is "Art" when you like the colors, maybe get a certain feeling in your tummy, just think "wow, this is great!" or have never seen anything quite like that before. Right? No. Wrong, totally wrong.

Don't be shocked. The Art market has done a great job in eliminating any definition of Art as such and instead introduced lengthy texts describing "styles" and "new inventions", disregarding if the subject belongs to the domain of Art, or not. And it often doesn't.

If we buy a car, we know exactly what we are looking for and of course expect it to run. If we buy Art, do we know what we are looking for? Sure! We are looking for artists we know, styles we understand and are not rarely driven by the hope of spending money on something that will eventually increase in value.

Whether that style or artist is actually producing Art, we may have missed to double-check, especially because it is hard to tell, what Art really is. Anything can be Art, right? No, wrong again. Totally wrong.

Let's start with the question what categories of art still exist for us, today? Probably Music, Literature, Architecture, Design and the ominous "Art" itself come to your mind. Funny enough, the first four are easy to describe and identify, while Art is not.

But Art has a definition that is overwhelmingly simple and true for all styles that ever emerged: Before you become an artist, you learn various techniques to create objects. Once you are an artist you create subjects. A real piece of Art has gone through a life inducing creation process and developed a life of its own. This is true for Art from Giotto, Botticelli, Dürer, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Caravaggio, Titian, Rubens, Velázquez, Goya, to Manet, Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso and many living artists all with totally different styles. But the objective criterion is that their Art is "alive".

In order to be alive, there have to be several tempi (different velocities), contrasts and tensions in a piece of Art. But then, it also should be meaningful and relevant in what it expresses. You can give a speech in the most professional and moving way, but if your words are meaningless, you had better stay quiet. Useless words are equal to problematic mistakes in Art that come from a lack of skills, technical or analytical. Lack of such skills will always hinder the object from becoming a subject, which in some cases may not be of concern, since beautiful objects of Applied Arts such as a diamond ring, or a watch can be great and highly valuable without necessarily becoming Art subjects that talk to us.

This definition allows us to find out, if something is Art, or if it is Literature, which may use objects as letters. Or if it is visualized Music. Or pure Philosophy. Or simply a decorative object, a work of "Applied Arts". All of this does of course not say, whether you should like it or not. Taste is something very personal and this definition leaves you the freedom to like Art by Leonardo and Picasso, or not. But it does not leave you the freedom to say it's not Art.

If we reduce Art to our personal taste, then of course it becomes unfair towards the artist. We can't say that Leonardo wasn't an artist because we don't like his paintings. As an Art Lover, you have to learn to be skeptical about your own taste and to open up your mind for new things. But you should be able to understand, if what you are looking at really is Art or something else, even if it may be equally interesting. After buying a handbag instead of a car, you don't return home saying that you bought a lovely car, which looks like a handbag, do you? Still, both could have the same appeal to you.

When it comes to buying, let your taste make the choice, but don't start mixing definitions! Be aware of what you buy. This way, you will be a true Art Lover.

What about the artists? Most of them want to invent something new, something beautiful, or they aim at showing common or rare aspects of human behavior, often resulting in rather shocking Art. The cleaner the message, the better. But then again, stupidity and banality are no excuses, especially not for artists.

One of the most provocative artists I have come across so far is Kristian Hornsleth. His pictures and objects are frequently based on photographs of often sexually explicit images, but also other subjects, displaying the results of primitive instincts that unfortunately seem to have more and more impact in our society. He uses sex, brutality, wealth and discrimination depicted in "real" photographs as a basis for his art and brings them to life in a colorful, explosive way, often by adding provocative texts and his name in the center, as if to say: "This is all around me, all about me and I, the artist, will not let it go unnoticed!"

Art about primitive emotions and extreme situations (unfortunately happening daily) gathers its strength from many sides. One is the known truth that the character of humankind is not always loving and caring, no matter how hard people try to pretend that they are. The most polite and educated people can nourish the cruelest thoughts and in subtle ways create hell for others, while still keeping a kind smile on their face. Or they do it in a less subtle way towards people, who cannot defend themselves. In any case, key is to keep this cruelty hidden. For Hornsleth, key is to show it in the most direct way imaginable, a truth that hurts, even though one could say he does exaggerate.

Hornsleth may have his personal experiences in these areas and it may be a way for him to cope, like a historian, who writes about wars, massacres, rapes, abuses, intrigues and vain glory. He also wants to document and preserve these observations and actions, like he wanted to document mankind in its entirety with The Deep Storage Project. He clearly is he incarnation of the artist, who thinks he can see through the protective layer of society and reveal the truth hidden underneath the surface. He himself knows very well that he is part of that society and no better than others.

With his demonstrative signature in the middle of his paintings he seems eager to say: "I saw it, I was there and I guarantee it is original and true!". Underneath his surface however, he may think: "... and it is in me, in my thoughts, as well. I am the victim, the offender, the witness, the judge and the publisher! That's why he puts his signature on it like a powerful seal: "This is from Hornsleth, I was here and I shall keep this alive forever!" In fact absurdity and the commonplace are a matter of perception and highly individual.

Hornsleth likes to dive into the more absurd and repulsive waters as if they were normal, leaving his comment and signature like pieces of evidence. The actions he shows are sometimes deeply repetitive – as they are in real life. Even if disgusting at times, they are not banal, they are no objects, but subjects, which have their own will and don't care about our feelings, only about their actions.

Hornsleth creates provocative, documentary action paintings, seeking the truth. But truth doesn't exist; only provocation does. His art is not meaningless and not easy to digest. He is not just putting shit into a can, hiding it away as an object. He is bringing it to life and that's what an artist must do.

All those, who think that Art is about creating pseudo-sophisticated, aesthetically convincing, but meaningless and decorative colored surfaces, may be disappointed, but Art is not just there to please. And not every nice object is Art.

My initial definition of Art, which originates from Aristoteles, may help as a guideline and shows that no matter what style you are talking about, Art is only Art, if it lives. Otherwise we are talking about Art objects – works of the decorative or applied Arts. This is no judgment of quality or value, but a fact. The judgment comes with taste. Your taste. Obviously, Hornsleth and his provocative paintings, sculptures and projects fascinate many people and in one regard, nobody may disagree: He is a powerful, highly divisive artist – with remarkable technical skills and a merciless eye.

Friedrich Kisters 2014