

Linda Lanier-Keosaian
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WHAT IS A WORK OF ART?
A Response to the Writing of Monroe Beardsley
Introduction, Chapter 1, and Postscript: Aesthetics

The fact that Monroe Beardsley felt the need to write a Postscript to his book, some twenty years later, in which he both embellished upon his original idea of what is an *aesthetic object*, and also contradicted some of his earlier writings, is an indication that what one considers to be an aesthetic object, or work of art, will evolve over time, just as we all evolve as human beings. We live in a culture rich with art and artful events which, if we engage ourselves in experiencing, will considerably change us over time. Beardsley even confessed that one of his earlier theories (that of *phenomenal objectivity*, a means of analyzing the aesthetic experience), he now finds to be unworkable. This argues for our developing for ourselves, with much study, our own idea of what is an aesthetic object, or work of art, and a means by which to evaluate both the object and the aesthetic experience, or lack of it, when encountering such a work.

Can a Beethoven Symphony, a sunset, the Grand Canyon, a Monet painting, a ceremonial mask from Africa, a water jug from 2000 B .C., a Shakespearean play, modern art film and photography share in the same worshipful category known as *art*? Beardsley says in his original writings that an aesthetic object must be of human intention, human production. In his postscript he apologizes (somewhat) for this interpretation, and agrees “nature has aesthetic value” but that “artworks are a richer source of aesthetic value” as a consequence of their human source. (p. xx) He then says that the value of an aesthetic object is to be measured in the human response to it, that is, in the intensity of the aesthetic experience. Who is to measure this? And how? Again, is this not an individual response based upon all of our previous experience, or our apperceptive mass? I think the answer to this last question is answered by Beardsley in his need to qualify his earlier writings by producing his Postscript. In the course of those twenty years, he undoubtedly encountered not only writings of other critics who opposed his views, but aesthetic objects to which he responded intensely. Very likely the objects and the responses were not accounted for in the earlier writings. He felt the need to expand his definition of art to include these new appreciations. Based upon this evolved sense of perception, it must be said that we do not perceive things as they are; we perceive things as *we* are.

This last statement bears special meaning for performing musicians, whose art exists in *time*. Whether we are in the business of interpreting another’s music, or of improvising our own, each new *presentation* of it

is distinctly different, based upon *who we are* at that moment. The example Beardsley gave (from another critic) of two statements, (p. xxvi) which he called elliptical, I see instead as distinct from each other in meaning. “I have heard the First Brandenburg Concerto,” he says is elliptical with “I heard a performance of the First Brandenburg Concerto.” Of course, both hearings were the result of performances, but the omission of the word “performance” from the first statement could mean that the hearer felt that the experience of Bach’s music was so powerful in that hearing as to transcend the performers themselves. The second statement is the more mundane.

In music, as in dance and drama, the artifact is the work of the composer, choreographer, or playwright, while the performance is the medium by which the artifact comes to life. The artifact can be perceived and evaluated on its own terms as an aesthetic object to be cherished and studied by future generations. Each presentation of these artifacts involves new players, dancers, and actors who each bring all that they are at any given moment to bear upon the performance of the piece. Even when there is careful attention to be faithful to the original intent of the writer or composer, the performance of it, and consequently the presentation to each percipient, will be different, some more successful or more beautifully done than others. In music, we say that only the greatest works can stand up to that kind of constant scrutiny, or even abuse. Beardsley gave an example of performances of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony by Toscanini and by Furtwangler as being different in length and impact. I will add to that list another performance of the same work, conducted by Leonard Bernstein at the Berlin Wall. Beardsley asks whether these performances can be said to be of the same work, as they are so different. My answer is, yes, they are performances of the same artifactual work, but through the medium of human musicians who change by the moment. The end result will necessarily be different, as it ought to be. Each performance of an artifact becomes an aesthetic object, to be encountered on its own terms.

I can remember the admonition of more than one teacher to play a piece as if I had made it up on the spot, that is, to internalize the composer’s intentions on the page, then to make it my own in the performance, resulting in a performance which speaks directly to the listeners. We bring all that we are to a performance, and then perform as *we are*. We are producing a new aesthetic object each time we do so.