

HURON HEIGHTS SECONDARY SCHOOL

GRADE 12 ARTS HURON PORTFOLIO – AV14M2

What is Art? A Major Paper

The following questions deal with a broad and often puzzling area of art theory called aesthetics. How are ideas of beauty, value, taste and significance determined? What has Modern Art done to change accepted notions of truth and beauty? Now that we have entered a period of so called “Post Modernism” in art history, how will the creative imperatives and purposes of artists and designers change to meet the needs of our society in the new millennium? Hopefully these questions will spark an insight, address a personal concern or fuel your imagination to ponder the philosophical nature of the visual arts.

1. What is art? How is it different from other functions of human concern? Can art exist in nature?
2. What conditions are necessary for something to be considered as work of art? Can you establish particular or objective guidelines to designate something as art? Make up your own list of criteria for something to be considered art.
3. The following is a quote by Suzi Gablik in her book *Has Modernism Failed?* 1984 p38.
There is nothing about an art object – no special property or function – that makes something a work of art except our attitude towards it and our willingness to accept it as art.
How would you respond to this statement? Is it true or false? Back up your statement.
4. Where did the term masterpiece come from? Why are some works of art considered Masterpieces? Locate two Masterpieces and defend their status as such. (You may refer to Kenneth Clarke's book *What is a Masterpiece.*)
5. How has tradition played a role in defining what “acceptable art” is? Locate three examples of artistic traditions or conventions that have long legacies.
6. What is Academic Art? Why has this term been viewed with contempt for the last century? Find a couple of academic works (paintings or sculptures) and assess their value. Compare them with other works of the same period that were judged as more acceptable (HINT: Examine the collection of the Musee d'Orsay, Paris)
7. In the process of creating a work of art or craft, which is more important to the creator, the human activity or the finished product? Does creativity end once a work is complete? Is it important to create a tangible image or object in order to be called an artist? (reference Conceptual and Performance Art of the 1970's and 80's).
8. *Frequently while I'm in the middle of painting, some friend comes by and says “Leave it alone. Don't do another thing.” When that happens I know that I must keep going even if there is a possibility of destroying a painting. There is also the possibility that I might make it even better. When I feel that what has been put on canvas cannot be disturbed, I leave it alone, even it is not perfect. It is a risk.* (Joan Snyder in ART news, November 1985).
When is a work of art finished? Many artists retouch “finished” work. Is it a carefully planned final phase in the creative process or simply a spontaneous act, a stop at an interesting place?
9. How would you define beauty as it relates to art? Why is the term problematic? Can something that is ugly or boring still be considered as aesthetically pleasing? What about other human responses such as fright and horror, nostalgia, the erotic and the sensual, the “excitement” of violence and cruelty, feelings of pity or bitterness, and desires in all their sensuous forms – can any of these reactions constitute a valid aesthetic experience? Find examples of images or objects that elicit the above emotions – please ensure that examples are school appropriate.

10. What is taste? Is personal taste a valid and honest means of assessing quality in art?
11. What is meant by the term **Kitsch**? Provide some examples of these images or objects. How is the kitsch object related to popular culture and personal taste?
12. What is **Bad Art**? Create a work of bad art. Does it pose any merits or quality?
13. How do museums and art galleries change the way a work of art is perceived? Think of personal visits that you have made and recount your impressions. Go to a gallery before answering this question.
14. Why are fakes and forgeries considered unethical and illegal? Is this really an aesthetic or economic concern? Can one not have an equally satisfying experience with an exceptional forgery as opposed to the authentic work?
15. What constitutes an original work of art? Why is copying considered to be an unacceptable practice for artists? Where does this modern pre-occupation with originality and uniqueness come from? Why is Andy Warhol so popular? Look at examples of appropriation art by contemporaries like Jeff Koons and Sherrie Levine. Can an artist be accused of plagiarism or copyright violations?
16. *As long as we are willing to consider anything as art, innovation no longer seems possible or even desirable.* (Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* P11)
Without any permanent values, traditions or ways of doing things, and no sense of what is and isn't art these days, can one really speak of an artist's success or failure? Does Post-Modernism really mean a lack of quality in art?
17. *What the modern means of reproduction have done is to destroy the authority of art and to remove it – or remove its images which they reproduce – from any preserve. For the first time ever, image or art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free. They have entered the mainstream of life of which they no longer ...have power* (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972, p 32)
How have the mass media and advertising altered public attitudes and perceptions about works of art? What is the "authority" to which the author refers? How do reproductions make art "valueless"?
18. What is taboo? What cultural taboos does our society observe in order to distinguish art from pornography? Can an image or object be psychologically damaging or morally subversive, or is it the interpretation of the viewer that calls morality into question?
19. *Beginning in 1989, a series of vicious attacks was launched against artists, cultural institutions, and the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) intensifying into a heated public and political debate on magazine covers and in editorial pages... The cultural community has been both shaken and mobilized by the events of the past two years, whose chilling effects will be felt for years to come.* (Lisa Philips, *Culture under Siege*, 1991 Whitney Biennial Exhibition, 1991)
If a work of art shocks or disgusts, should it be censored? Who should have this power? Can artistic freedom and moral responsibility be reconciled?
20. Which is more significant as a work of art da Vinci's Mona Lisa, Jackson Pollock's Lavender Mist or Bill Watterson's Calvin & Hobbes? Justify your answer.
21. *Welcome to image world. Images are icons, fetishes, propaganda, informational constructs and abstractions. Images are the theatres of spectacle, the arbiters of beauty, the mirrors of identity, the guides to consumer activity, the carriers of the news, the documents of falsity, the templates of memory, the conduits of publicity, the vessels of celebrity, the official channels of public address, the borders of imagination and sometimes the messengers of hope.* (Marvin Heiferman, *Everywhere, All the Time, for Everybody, Image World*, 1989).
How can images influence intelligent, rational human beings? What is the relationship between art and propaganda? How different are WWII Nazi posters (or sculptures) promoting nationalist sentiment compared with corporate advertising images in the media?

22. *The phrase “anxious object” was first used by the critic Harold Rosenberg to describe the kind of modern art that makes us uneasy because of uncertainty as to whether we are in the presence of a genuine work of art or not* (Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* 1984, p36)
Why do many people consider only realistic art to be worthwhile and of any appreciable value? What is it about abstract or non-objective styles that cause public scepticism, anger, and resistance? Does an “anxious object” embody subversive tendencies?
23. How is art regarded in non-Western cultures? Is African, Mesoamerican, Inuit or other aboriginal art really “primitive” as it has been called? Multicultural and multiethnic artist influences can be recognized in our contemporary Canadian culture. Identify some of these influences.
24. What is the most important work of art in the world? Present and defend your selection.
25. *If modern aesthetics was inherently isolationist, aimed at disengagement and purity, my sense is that we will be seeing over the next few decades art that is essentially social and purposeful, art that reflects the myths of neutrality and autonomy* (Suzi Gablik, *The Re-enchantment of Art*, 1991 p4)
Can art be used to change our culture and social order? How can art address issues of spirituality, ethics, multiculturalism, conservation & ecology, and social responsibility? Has this occurred in the years since Suzi wrote her book?
26. Devise 5 of your own questions about the nature of art.

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