

WHAT WE
TALK ABOUT
WHEN WE
TALK
ABOUT TALKING
ABOUT ART

*(SPOILER ALERT: THE ANSWER
DOESN'T ALWAYS HAVE TO DO WITH ART)*



What are we talking about when we talk about art?

It sounds obvious to say that we're talking about 'art'. The word is strange, imprecise. After all, so much contemporary art is *about* the meaning of art in general. Art is either about what it means for a work of art to be a work of art – for *this* work of art to be the work of art that it is – or it uses materials that viewers usually associate with something that has nothing to do with art at all.

Art takes from life, which is supposed to be *outside* art: strips of newspaper stuck directly into a painting; urinals placed on plinths in gallery spaces as if they were sculptures; bananas taped to the walls of a booth at an art fair; malfunctioning cathode ray televisions piled on top of each other showing cascades of snowy static until the end of time, or at least until the exhibition ends.

People involved with art take this for granted. Those outside of it do not.

So when we talk about art, we're talking about a distinctive conceptual territory called 'art'. But this specially designated world includes many things that have little or nothing to do with what we once thought art was supposed to be.

That means that, when we *are* talking about art, we often can't avoid talking about things that *aren't* art. We've collectively agreed that there's a special realm of human activity called 'art' that is full of things called 'works of art', but it can only have a meaning in relation to what it excludes (if it excludes anything).

Perhaps, then, the best we can do is to say that, when we say 'art', we're talking about something that has to appear in a certain 'art-place' and 'art-time': the vast, echoey museum, the claustrophobic gallery, the institution, the art-space. These places give art-objects their peculiar dignity *as* art-objects.

But *that* raises another question.

Why should we go to art-places to look at these art-things when there are so many other, really non-artistic, things out there that we could be looking at instead? And when we talk about these non-artistic things, how do we know we're

not talking about what we talk about when we talk about art?

Unless you're one of the small number of people who are actively involved with making art, or displaying it, buying it, selling it, teaching it, or talking about it (or talking about what it means to talk about talking about it), most of the time, you will be aware of art under a few conditions.

One is historical significance: the sense that some works matter more than others because they belong to the history of art (or to the history of history, which doesn't always have so much to do with art, and certainly doesn't ask us to talk about talking about art because it only asks us to talk about talking about history).

Another, more likely, condition is when 'art' is related to another part of the entertainment industry that art is, these days, inevitably a part of, willingly or not.

So 'art' doesn't just mean *art* to most people.

It also means fashion, luxury, celebrity, lifestyle, culture: areas where money talks and the value of things is mostly measured *by* money. At the very least, this money provides sponsorship. It supports institutions and goes directly to buying and displaying art. It lets the public know there are places they can go to see art, and helps to keep the roof on.

So what we're talking about when we talk about art isn't just art and how we talk about it. We're also talking about why we value it: why we value art *as* art, and not as something else (no matter what the art is made from and what we were talking about when we were talking about it).

But this raises another question: what do we mean by 'value' in the first place?

Sometimes the artists who make the art are celebrities. (Sometimes they've become celebrities because they're celebrated for making celebrated works of art; at other times, of course, they're celebrities who've been celebrated for doing celebrated things that didn't have anything to do with art, but are now making art either to quietly retire from being



celebrated for those other things that aren't art *or* to be celebrated anew *for making art*, though what they make is unlikely to not just be a sub-category of the special category of art-things called 'art-made-by-celebrities-who-weren't-art-celebrities-to-begin with'.)

In the case of art-celebrities, we value them because we get a kick out of their personalities and their wild cavorting antics – their irreverent attitude towards life, these gloomy *bon-vivants*, or because they've been able to buy magnificent things for themselves with the money they've made selling their art.

Just as the art-objects they make belong to a unique category of object, the celebrity-artist becomes a special category of person: the alienated rebel, the outsider who shocks polite society in the name of truer values.

Or perhaps the works themselves are celebrities.

Their names evoke associations like logos or brands. We value them because we're in the presence of something that has commercial value of a kind we could rarely imagine from our own lives – their celebrity-like status comes from their enormous price tags and not what they look like or what it feels like for us to look at them. >



Or, perhaps, the opposite is the case and the art transcends merely material values.

Perhaps, we think, art isn't just another object among objects. Perhaps it has an eternal spiritual or moral value: an invisible residue evacuated from a world in which economics is the queen of the social sciences and value is measured only by price. This makes some people nervous because they're not used to it (and feel like they're unable to talk about it, or talk about talking about it, in any other way than how we talk about things, and talk about talking about things, in the terms we *are* used to, which is in terms of price).

And yet we feel, before we see it, that it will be good for us. Then, once we *have* seen it, we feel ourselves elevated in some way (but talking about why we feel this way means learning how to talk about art, which you can only learn by seeing art and then talking about it, and then talking about talking about it).

The *Mona Lisa*. *David*. *Sunflowers*.

Obvious examples, sure, but because they all have celebrity-brand-recognition status *and* are deemed to be priceless *and* perfect examples of what it is for a work of art to be a work of art, they also tell

us something about contemporary art, in which lots of artists try to be celebrities and give themselves and what they do a coherent brand identity, *but* create art which has prices we all know about because they're often made public, and which, sadly, may not be all that good all the time (or ever).

In the case of celebrity, there's an analogy between visibility, controversy and cash-value. In the case of the art market, the currency is literally money (numbers on a screen, these days, rather than cold, hard cash).

Many people find this distasteful. They think art should have nothing to do with the sordid world of commercial exchange. It should be a pure 'aesthetic' experience.

But saying this assumes that art has somehow always been free of controversy, scandal, glamour, power or money.

This doesn't hold up to scrutiny.

Art has always existed in fraught dialogue with power, politics and money. Each one legitimates the other. Art is always part of some system that justifies it, and to which it gives a veneer of legitimacy in return. If art is going to be 'art' and not something else – *not* religious ritual paid for by the church to glorify God, *not* propaganda paid for by political rulers to glorify themselves, *not* flattery of a patron

for the glory of their legacy – it needs the market and the way of valuing things that comes with it.

So what are we talking about when we talk about art?

The answer is: 'art'.

The answer is also that, when we talk about art, we talk about what it takes to talk about art. And when we talk about what it takes to talk about art, we talk about what it takes to talk about talking about art.

And when we talk about what it takes to talk about talking about talking about art, we have to talk about what it takes to talk about talking about talking about art, and what it takes to talk about that.

And why do we value it?

Because talking about art – and talking about talking about art – opens up a space in which we do not only talk about prices.

Most of the time, when we're not talking about art – and this really is most of the time, because art is a marginal pursuit, and talking about it is even more marginal, even if people involved in art forget this – we talk about the price of things.

The prices are still there in art. And we talk about them.

But they don't tell the whole story. ✕

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photographs:

(139) Tomasz Kręcicki, *Big handle*, 2025, oil on canvas, 213x124 cm. Photo © Andrea Rossetti.

Courtesy the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin / Paris / Seoul.

(141) Tomasz Kręcicki, *Untitled*, 2023, oil on canvas, 110x140 cm. Photo © Mateusz Torbus.

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(142) Tomasz Kręcicki, *Gel*, 2023, oil on canvas, 110x140 cm. Photo © Mateusz Torbus.

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