

## Are Artistic Truths Always Directed Towards Things Outside of Art?

### Introduction

There are no artistic truths claims the philosopher Jerome Stolnitz. In this essay I will examine this controversial assertion about the nature of art. To do this I am going to define the word truth, and then look at some ways art can be understood and whether the argument always holds up. Simply put: Stolnitz claims there is something we call artistic truths, and because these truths are always proper to some extra-artistic sphere, we cannot actually call them artistic truths.

### Artistic Truths

To understand the claim we must define the words used. The two words that are of importance here are “truth” and “art”. The latter will not be defined as it depends on how one understands art as a concept. Instead I will look at the claim through four different understandings of art and see whether they work with all of them. Let us then define the word “truth”. It is obvious that the claim here is not as universal as its colloquial use. The text brings three examples of the variety of “truths” found in art: 1) big pronouncements on man’s fate, 2) middle-sized pronouncements on the working of pride in human nature, and 3) small accounts of a period in the history of an English court. With these three examples it seems like the word truth is used to denote the claim (account, pronouncement) that a certain artistic piece is trying to communicate.<sup>1</sup>

It can focus on both large and small things, general or specific. And in this I believe Stolnitz is undeniably correct. Art cannot be characterized by what it is aimed at. A crude caricature of John F. Kennedy, would hardly be disqualified from being considered art on the basis of it dealing with a specific issue. Similarly pieces of literature that ponder on the duties of mankind would not be looked over when seeking art due to its grandiose subjects.

### What is Art, and is It Aimed at Something?

To analyse the claim that these truths are aimed at things outside of itself, we need to look at the different understandings of what art is. I propose 4 routes. Art can either be seen as type of conversation, understanding, experience, or creation. These are obviously not the only four ways of viewing art, but they pose different enough positions that they have four different things to say about the quote. It is also important to note that most people do not see art as being one thing or another. Art can very much be characterised in a multitude of ways. However in order to put the claim under close scrutiny, I believe it is best to look at all of them as all-encompassing ways of understanding art. Out of these four, one (art as conversation) always fit the original argument, and three (art as experience, creation, and understanding) do not.

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<sup>1</sup> Whether art tries to communicate at all will be discussed later.

## I. Understanding

Let us first look at art being a type of understanding. When looking at art as having a subject at all, it is easy to slip into the position that art is meant to understand. Why would someone want to create art that deals with either of the three examples brought by Stolnitz, if not to get a deeper understanding of the subject matter? Reading about World War I perhaps leads to a shallower understanding of what it was like, than watching a film that deals with it, or reading a poem by Wilfred Owen. Some would go even as far as to say that understanding through art is the deepest understanding one can get. Because art does not deal with straight facts, or direct attempts of understanding, it somewhat lures the human mind into understanding. It helps the sunshine of truth fall upon the faces of man instead of being blinded by it through looking directly into the sun.

A good example of this position could be seen a couple of years back when a fake tweet by a politician was circling the internet. When the tweet that was meant as proof of the ignorance of the politician turned out to be fake some people that had used it in arguments made an interesting point. They claimed that it was irrelevant whether it was a true tweet, it nevertheless gave a good glimpse into what the politician is like. Thus, art (and whilst this is a loose definition of art, the point still stands) was said to give a type of understanding that was beyond the facts that it portrayed.

At first it seems like this fits Stolnitz's argument well, as it is clear that art is always a depiction of something, the something that it tries to understand. The novel *Crime and Punishment* makes claims about murder and conscience, the opera *Dido and Aeneas* about duty and revenge. But much modern art does not fit this very well. The art of Marina Abramovic for example, seems to be a counterexample to this view of art as a way of understanding something. Her performances often seem absurd and pointless. To name one, she once created a performance in which a nude woman and a nude man stand in front of each other in a narrow doorway. To get to the other side of the museum, one had to walk through this narrow doorway. But I propose the view that art is understanding does have a place for Abramovic's art if one claims that these are attempts at understanding art itself. A shocking and scandalous piece of performance art is meant to help us understand where the boundaries of art lie. But by rescuing this view, one has to disagree with Stolnitz as it would mean that there in fact does exist a type of meta-art that depicts itself. Not all art is like this, and indeed most seems to deal with things outside of itself, but there certainly exists artistic truths.

## II. Conversation

Art can also be seen as a type of conversation between the artist and the viewer. The question that a viewer should ask according to this school of thought is "What did the artist mean by this?" This is in some ways a narrower version of the previous view, in which art is not only meant to understand, but to understand what the artist meant. One could quickly claim that if artist X paints a painting titled "This is what art is", and makes it as clear as possible that this painting depicts art, then wouldn't Stolnitz's view fall? If we ascribe ourselves to this view, wouldn't we have to claim that this piece of art is about art itself? I would not say so. Contrary to the view of understanding, the truth of the piece is not seen as

being something universal. The truth of a poem by Owen is not “This is what World War I was like” as previously, but more like “These are the feelings Owen tried to convey”. This more human look makes it so that the truth of the previously mentioned painting would have to be “X tried to convey that this is what art means for them”. In this more personal fashion one can still claim that the painting deals not with art, but with what the artist tried to say about art. Thus all art does indeed make claims that lie outside of art. They can always be found within the intentions of the artist, and thus Stolnitz’s argument seems to hold up.

### III. Experience

Art seen as experience does not fit within the bounds of the claim made. This view claims that art is simply an experience and nothing else. It cannot be described as being directed towards something; it is a type of qualia. When looking at a painting, the aesthetic experience of that painting is what I feel when looking at it. Nothing more, nothing less. It is similar to the taste of coffee. When tasting coffee, do we make any claims about what its truth is? No. We all know that it is the experience itself. We can obviously talk about what that experience is like, but it would not deal with the truth of the art in any way. Just to give an example, a poem by Wilfred Owen deals with something (e.g. World War I), but that is not what the art is. The art is the feeling what one feels while reading it or hearing it. In this view I believe the truth of all art must be found in the piece of art itself. And thus not only is Stolnitz incorrect in some cases, but in all of them.

### IV. Creation

The last position leaves the viewer alone. It claims that art is mainly a tool for the artist to express themselves. It is (sometimes literally) a surface for the artist to express their emotions and thoughts on things. Art is a process, a way to understand oneself. There are pieces of art where this view is easily executed. Painters that painted solely for themselves and had no intention of showing it to the public for example. To these people it is easy to see that the art was meant to express, analyse, digest feelings and thoughts of the artist. Thus art becomes, similarly to the first two views, a tool. But unlike the first two views, it is a tool for the artist, not for the viewer. If we try to understand art like this, it is difficult to speak of what the truth of art itself is. Maybe the feelings of the artist. But perhaps in this view art is not really supposed to convey anything more than a paintbrush does. Creating art is the important part, not doing anything with it afterwards. This view barely fits the original argument as well, as Stolnitz sees art as a viewer, not as an artist. It does however agree with the conclusion, as this view must also agree that there are no artistic truths.

### Conclusion

To summarize, I first analysed what truth means in the quote. Then I moved on to look at four different views on what the purpose of art is. Looking at these as being all-encompassing positions on what the purpose of art is, I claim that only the views that art is creation and conversation agree with Stolnitz’s assertion, with only the latter fitting the argument. I also introduced two other views, that of art being a tool for understanding and a type of experience, ways of understanding art in which Stolnitz’s claim cannot be said to always be true and is always false respectively. In conclusion, I believe Stolnitz makes a great

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point about a lot of art, and about how art often works when we try to understand it, but it would be wrong to say that it is always correct.