

## ART DISSOLVES – THE AFTERLIFE

### ART IS NOT FOREVER

If humans lived average life spans of 1,000 years we would look at the history of art differently. The long ago would be longer ago. The memories of our childhood would expand to include remnants of the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, and the Kandinsky of 100 years ago would merely be a kid...his painterly scrawling perhaps still considered youthful exuberance and experimentation.

On the other end of real life spans, we know of creatures on Earth that live mere minutes, days or weeks. Mayflies are emblematic of ephemeral beings...and our pet dogs and cats die all too quickly. We outlive them by many decades. If these animals made art objects during their short life spans, what would "they" think of it in comparison of it to the human ability to create and enjoy art for 80 or 90 years? What if Bowser could create a painting at age two, his teen years? And what if a Mayfly that expired the day after its birth could create a sculpture in the third hour of its life? Would it consider its artful effort important though it existed for a mere few hours? Would we?

Would we look upon their art objects as "*less meaningful*" because those objects endured so briefly compared to our own more lengthy lives?

And as humans who are art interested, perhaps even connoisseurs, what do we now think of human made art that exists in a physical state but briefly...art that is allowed to blow away in the wind, washed down a stream, erected for days or weeks and then dismantled? Is the fine art object that has a life span of 10 years less significant than one that endures for 100...or 1,000?

Of course, part of our consideration in this regard has to do with our own memory. If a painting or sculpture is gone within moments, it is much less likely to be recognized long, to be studied and retained in our collective memories...and documented in articles and art history books. How long can we pay attention? How long does memory reside?

Before the advent of photography in the 1830's and its advances over the centuries, we did have the written descriptive words telling us about art that once existed but which is now gone, plus some of the objects that were saved to testify to what art was historically. But as we know those art objects had, in their day, been recorded and rescued from oblivion by persons with interest and the ability to retain them for our ongoing study and memory base. The art was often saved for posterity and its importance promulgated by humans with the means to do so...not by less fortunate humans without money or storage space or influence. For most of human existence, after all, most humans could not even read or write, let alone be part of the more sophisticated classes that rescued and saved art objects for future generations to appreciate. The art which has remained for us to see is generally here thanks to the wealthy, the educated and sophisticated, so it has been specially screened and selected for our eyes.

## PRESENCE, MEMORY AND DURATION

Physical cosmological existence goes on a very long time...some say forever. When measured against that expanse of never ending Time, humans are at least as ephemeral as the Mayfly. And the art we claim as important is only important in cultures for the period of time that other humans know about it. *(Let's not bring Alien observers into the discussion, or the ability of a super talented dear old Bowser to recognize the subtleties of human art.)*

So...in this essay I want to question how important a consideration it is regarding the length of existence an art object survives. Is it entirely logical that art objects that survive for 1000 years are more important than those which last for days? What if the memory of objects, how they looked and where they appeared, is extended by means of photographs? Does the documented memory created by the photographs enhance their value? Of course it does.

For some time now humans have recorded the existence of some art by means of photographs. Andy Goldsworthy and Christo are among the best known practitioners of creating short lived art, but then recording that art in photos. There are many artists, me included, who have attempted to enlarge the life span of their art products thru the means of photographs and/or film. At least since the 1950's there have been "happenings", temporary and site specific installations, with art expressions and art objects that were intentionally allowed to expire or self-destruct. We have the benefit of photographs and art history books to tell us about them, and if not these expressions would have faded entirely from memory.

Despite the art objects "dying off" in moments, photographs can extend their lives and influence. The photograph becomes a "fossil imprint" providing access to views of the objects that are no longer physically present and with us. These fossil remains, like those of dinosaurs, give renewed life to what no longer exists. These photos become a bit more useful than granite monuments; they allow us to actually see what those ephemeral expressions looked like. Perhaps, and I subscribe to this philosophy, the photos have become art objects which have recorded other art objects. The photos serve a useful "double duty". While metal detectors help us find ancient hoards, and good luck or research brings unrecognized valuable objects to the fore, cameras rescue objects from oblivion.

## VALUE ADDED – VALUE DIMINISHED

Small and partial traces of what existed might be all we have of that which has gone before, of what has been considered, invented, expressed before. The Mona Lisa has endured as a real physical object because persons have protected it and repeatedly restored it to a semblance of what it originally was. Jean Tinguely's 1960 "Homage to New York" was an assembled machine which intentionally destroyed itself, and it remains an iconic sculpture which endures in photos, film and art history texts.

Regarding that particular sculpture, which one of these four associated elements is most important to consider? A. *The formerly existing sculpture and its aesthetic appearance?* B. *The intent/philosophy*

*behind it; that it motivated and destroyed itself? C. The left over physical remains; the scrap metal which serve as clues? D. The photos and films which document its brief life?* I suspect there are arguments for and against the importance of any of those four points. But without the first act, the creation, there is no more discussion possible. And without the documentary evidence we cannot go on to explore its ramifications much further.

Humankind has “lost” art objects since ancient cave paintings and prehistoric small sculptures were produced. Altamira and the Venus of Willendorf are remarkable survivors, telling us about the human culture that once existed, and also providing clues to what else must have been present...suggesting the innumerable art objects that we have not yet learned about. Metal detectors help us find ancient hoards. Good luck and good research bring unrecognized valuable objects to the fore.

Had Cro-Magnon humans invented cameras, we would be cherishing and evaluating the images taken of the art that they recorded 20,000 or more years ago. The photos, with varying degrees of aesthetic appeal in themselves, would help mold the accepted status of art objects...to greater or lesser extent, depending on what today’s taste makers figure were the skills, artist perceptions and the hard to define “talents” of individual Cro-Magnon humankind.

And to further broaden the topic, the appeal of these Cro-Magnon photos would be judged based on characteristics of the photos themselves, the balance of composition, the employment of light...shading and illumination, the choice of subject, the employment of colors...sepia to complementary hues, etc.

So, we see as part of our 19<sup>th</sup> thru 21<sup>st</sup> century art culture that, thanks to technology, artists choose to photographically document for posterity what briefly came into being and existed by their own hands. Victorians photographed many ephemeral things to document and enrich for the future. And so today we photograph the Mayfly art objects, the short lived art expressions, the cultural appealing artistic pets, the seasonal art manifestations which come and go so quickly, relative to the length of our human lives.

#### FINALITY AND MEMORY THRU PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Without the artist’s motivation we know that an art object would not have been created.
2. Without the physical art object the photo would not exist that documents its brief life.
3. Without the photo we would know much less about the object, maybe even nothing, having very incomplete written visions of how it must have appeared to the human eye.
4. A corollary to the art museum which preserves actual art objects is the photo, the visual “place” wherein we can see art that lived more briefly. Both extend our memories.

The motivation for making art; the meaningfulness to the artist; the act of creating it; the acceptance of how it appears, the decision to arrest its further evolution and then to terminate its physical presence;

finding some means of extending its existence among us; these are the important underlying elements an artist must consider, and which are relevant to any discussion about art.

All those who observe the art or see some record of the art, whether thru written text, actual examples, or photo documentation, are always the final “deciders” of what is good or bad, important or insignificant, beautiful or ugly, meaningful or not...but only to themselves as individuals and to those they can persuade to think like them. We cannot escape the “Beauty is in the eyes of the Beholder” phenomenon...but that chance to grade the art is possible thanks to that record and remainder.

While artists are sometimes thought of as a variety of demi-gods puzzling others as they bring art into existence, you and all other observers, over time and with changing perceptions, are the judges and juries that determine what art is discussed and what remains. Your words and observations, indeed your lives, are ephemeral. Judgments about art are, to greater or lesser extent, based upon the length of human life and humankind’s duration; photographic documentation extends the life of art objects...the discussions and learning that arise about them.

So...finally, existentially and for all Time, it is thru our choices and actions while alive that we create meanings, the choices and actions of both artists and observers. Life will endure only if Life begets Life. Art will endure in some form or another by the artistic creative impulse, but only if humans encourage and nurture it, recording it in some form for their descendants. How long art lives, its shelf life, depends on how soon our memories and discussions fade.

By photographic evidence the brief lives of humans and their art can be extended long after mortal expiration dates. How long some “thing” physically survives, how long its mortal remains exist, does not connote the authentic value of that life, that expression. It might endure and have affect for generations thanks to extended memory, that characteristic for educating future peoples, which separates humankind from other forms of life on Earth.

In the propagation of living things the act of mating, by which life is extended, might take but minutes or seconds. The importance of that act of creative impulse is profound, as a species and the particular genes of individuals can be extended. Art that is created in both long and brief episodes might be important and enduring, no matter how long it exists in a physical state.

Fifteen minutes? Fifteen years? Fifteen centuries? The fact that it existed at all can seem like a miracle, and its importance to others over any period of years can affect the course of events, the nature of thought...as long a memory resides.