

From the Editor

Exploring the Land Where Art Lives

by Kirsten Hively

First of all, I'd like to thank the many WBURG readers who responded to my previous column. That essay on beauty received more responses than any other WBURG article ever has. I'd especially like to thank the many readers who wrote to offer copies of copies of copies of Dave Hickey's book *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. As it turns out the book is out of print and I spoke to both the publisher (Art Issues Press) and Mr. Hickey, and neither has any plans to reissue it (they say there isn't enough interest). A shame. The book is also missing from used bookstores and even online book searches like Amazon, Powells, and Alibris. I did, however, manage to find a friend with a copy and photocopied the entire book (it's only 64 pages long). If you have a chance, it is well worth the read.

I was cheered to find out that even though the text of *The Invisible Dragon* may be hard to locate, the ideas discussed there are alive and well. In thinking about those ideas over the last few weeks, I began to think about what ideas mean to art and why I think that the kind of philosophical discussion found in *The Invisible Dragon* is important to art.

It has been said that architecture is the "mother of all arts," but I think it's just one of the children. The real mother, in my mind, is philosophy. Philosophy — the pursuit of wisdom — is the homeland of art. Outside are crafts, illustration, most popular culture. And while there are some who straddle the border, it's philosophy, the nurturing of ideas, the deep think that makes art, well, art. And it's that deep think that can answer art's identity crisis. Most of us know art when we see it, but what is it that we're recognizing? It's not the use of oil paints or sonata form or symmetry (many contemporary artists have rejected these media in order to make the point that they don't automatically confer the status of art), or even an enframing museum, art gallery, or concert hall. The thing I recognize in art is the deep think. A great piece of art elicits a kind of "Hail, fellow, well met," response from my brain recognizing the artist as another thoughtful being. The thoughts may be fulfilling, gratifying, challenging, moving, energizing, enervating, or shocking — it doesn't matter. All that matters is that they are there and that I the observer have the opportunity to connect to them.

This doesn't make art any more important than craft or pop culture — in fact, when the system is working they are all interdependent and feed off of each other — but it also doesn't make art any less important. And art means all the arts, anything that communicates a deep think: painting, drawing, writing, dancing, singing, playing, acting, composing, building, filming, photographing. Anything that activates our senses to fire up our brain can be art, although it seems that disciplines that rely primarily on our senses of smell and taste have a harder time transmitting deep thinks. Could it be because our limited vocabulary for tastes and smells limits our thoughts in that direction? In his essay "Do Dogs Think?" Bertrand Russell has said that perhaps when we think we are just talking to ourselves, rather than other people. But as anyone who

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has worked in a nonverbal art form can attest, thinking can happen without words. So maybe one day perfumers and chefs will cross into the world of art, too.

Maybe part of art's ceaseless quest for novelty is part of a yearning to prove itself. If the ideas are new, there must have been some thinking involved. But even novelty comes from somewhere and there is a wide and fertile territory between the delight of the new and the trustworthiness of the familiar. And is possible to use either traditional techniques or cutting edge technology to give shape to a deep think, just as either can be used to disguise a lack of thought. Only the former counts as true art, though.

Art has felt the incursions of popular culture greatly in the last century, and has, at times, come close to losing its identity. What is art, and why does it matter, when money, power, and prestige have accumulated disproportionately in the other camp? Art has grown defensive, jealously guarding what territory it can grab, whether or not it belongs there. While looking for a deep think isn't an easy yardstick, it is, I think, the best way to judge what art is – better than relying on technique or traditional definitions. And while many people will have different ideas about what a deep think is and which of the world's many creations have it and which don't, it's easier to agree to disagree when we have a common vocabulary to discuss what we think makes the cut.

Art needs to relax about craft – it, too, is under attack. And it's only when thoughtful artists support mindful artisans (and vice versa) that we can hope to bring back balance to our culture.

Recognizing philosophy as the real mother of all arts might help art lose the whiny, defensive stance it seems prone to in recent decades. Gray zones between art, craft, and popular culture are inevitable and useful – they keep the borders open so tools and technologies can migrate freely – but a map of art's territory could be useful, too. So put on your thinking cap and go exploring.

Kirsten Hively is the editor and producer of wburg.com. She can be reached at editor@wburg.com.