

# *Art and the Reconfiguration of the Ordinary: A Critical Exploration of Aesthetic Transformation*

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the profound role of art in transforming everyday experience. It considers how art unsettles habitual modes of perception and disrupts routine, creating opportunities for renewal and expanded consciousness. By examining dimensions of aesthetic experience, such as the interaction of mind and body, the emotional resonance of artistic encounters, and the ongoing process of meaning-making, the essay highlights how art fosters attentiveness, empathy, and openness toward ambiguity and complexity. Through art, individuals and communities can sharpen their self-reflection, engage their imagination, and develop deeper connections with one another. Ultimately, the essay argues that art is not just an object of contemplation, but an active and living event that catalyzes self-discovery, critical dialogue, and the continual reconfiguration of the ordinary.

## 1. Introduction

Art possesses a unique power: it can fundamentally change the very way we see, experience, and understand the world around us. This transformative quality of art is not limited to providing pleasure, presenting beauty, or even challenging our expectations. Instead, it lies in art's subtle yet profound ability to unsettle our habits, disrupt our routines, and awaken us to the extraordinary within the ordinary. Art also helps us step outside the automatic patterns of thought and perception that shape our daily lives, offering fresh perspectives and new possibilities. By inviting us to look again at what we thought was familiar, art expands the horizons of both our inner worlds and our relationships with others. It opens windows into new ways of perceiving reality, bridging the gap between mind and body, and drawing us into intense and meaningful emotional exchanges. Art encourages us to ask difficult questions about ourselves, stirring self-reflection and curiosity about our beliefs and assumptions. Furthermore, the arts create a delicate balance between freedom and structure, giving us space to explore and imagine while anchoring our experiences within tangible forms. They also develop our abilities to observe, interpret, and create, nurturing new skills that extend beyond the world of art itself and enrich our everyday lives. On a collective level, art generates opportunities for genuine connection between people, fostering shared understanding, dialogue, and a sense of belonging. Therefore, this essay will examine these dimensions of the artistic experience: how art reconfigures what we take for granted, opens up new ways of seeing and feeling, connects the physical and the mental, engages deeply with our emotions, motivates us to reflect on who we are, balances creativity with form, nurtures new abilities, and helps to shape a vibrant and meaningful life in

community with others.

## 2. Making the Familiar Strange: How Art Changes the Way We See

Most of the time, we only notice a small part of the world. Our routines and habits can narrow our awareness, causing us to overlook things that are right in front of us. Art breaks through this sleepwalking by interrupting our normal patterns and drawing attention to what we usually miss. Maxine [4] argues that when we encounter art, we become more deeply engaged with our surroundings, and we discover meanings that were hidden under the surface of everyday life. Art invites us to look at things differently, to see the familiar as strange, and to approach the world with curiosity and imagination. This shift in perception doesn't happen automatically. It requires effort and active attention, something we rarely give in daily routines. Art encourages us to pause, focus, and look again: whether it's viewing a painting, reading an unusual poem, or experiencing a performance that makes us see the ordinary in a new way. Each encounter with art helps us break out of old thinking and brings new possibilities. Dewey sees art as an ongoing process that involves not just the artist and the artwork, but also the audience and society [1]. The meaning of art is not fixed; it is shaped by our engagement with it. Dewey says art removes the covers that hide the expressiveness of things, uncovering energy and insight that routine has hidden [1]. When we pay attention to art, the world becomes more open to wonder, humor, anxiety, or protest. Art's impact is not only intellectual. It also triggers our senses and emotions, often blending thought and feeling together. When an artwork moves us, it can change not only what we know, but also how we feel, and even who we think we are.

## 3. The Importance of New Experiences

What makes art truly powerful is its ability to shake us out of familiar, repetitive routines and introduce us to unknown or unexpected ways of seeing and being in the world. Instead of simply reinforcing what we already know, art prompts us to question assumptions, to notice details we might otherwise miss, and to experience moments of wonder or surprise in our daily surroundings. Maxine Greene, a leading thinker on aesthetic education, argues that art's value goes far beyond novelty [4]. In her view, the true purpose of art is to teach us to see the world more deeply, with attentiveness and openness. This means looking past the surface and being willing to face ambiguity, uncertainty, and even discomfort as part of the artistic process. By helping us see freshly, art can transform how we understand ourselves and our environment. This transformative quality of art is not automatic or effortless. Berleant emphasizes that fully appreciating art demands careful and repeated attention [2]. Art is rarely something we instantly get. Instead, meaning and enjoyment slowly unfold when we spend prolonged time with a work, returning to it multiple times, noticing different features on each visit, and allowing ourselves to feel and think differently with each encounter. Becker also suggests that the richest experiences happen when we allow art to challenge us, and when we are patient enough to let new questions and emotions arise in this process of ongoing discovery [1]. This perspective stands in contrast to the idea that art always "speaks for itself" clearly and immediately, to every viewer. In reality, understanding art requires effort, patience, and openness. We need to linger with the artwork, engage with it on different occasions, and accept that our interpretations might change as our experiences and perspectives grow. Greene and Jackson [4,5] both stress that this ability to engage deeply with art is not reserved for those with special talent or expertise; instead, it can be developed by anyone willing to be affected and changed by what they encounter. The democratizing message here is important: art is not just for critics, connoisseurs, or insiders. It is something anyone can approach, regardless of background, if they bring humility, persistence, and curiosity. When we engage with art in this way, it does more than simply add to our knowledge, it

expands our sense of what is possible, helps us reimagine our hopes, and reveals life as an ongoing process of discovery and transformation. Art invites every person to participate, offering opportunities to see the world in new ways, to connect more deeply with themselves, and to stay open to change throughout life.

#### **4. Embodiment: Art Involves Both Mind and Body**

People often discuss art in terms of meaning and intellectual interpretation, but aesthetic experience is always rooted in the body. Berleant insists that our bodies are central to experiencing art [2]. Looking at a sculpture uses not just our eyes but our movement, balance, and touch. Music brings out rhythm and movement in our bodies, and dance combines mind and muscle. This embodied experience is what makes art so important. Sometimes, understanding an artwork comes through our body before we can put it into words. Berleant says that paying attention to sensation and emotion can help us unlock new dimensions in art [2]. Rather than separating mind and body, art encourages a more holistic experience, where both work together. Recognizing this wholeness matters; most transformative art experiences don't come just from thinking. Our hearts race before a bold painting; old memories may be triggered by a song; a performance with others creates a feeling deep in our bodies. Including the body in our response to art makes understanding richer and more personal.

Greene talks about education for wide-awakeness, not just as something schools do, but as a challenge to live actively and attentively in the world [4]. This means approaching life and other people with empathy, openness, and a willingness to face complexity. Spending time with difficult or ambiguous artworks helps us grow this attentiveness, teaching us to move beyond simple answers and step into unfamiliar contexts. This kind of awareness helps us move past the limits of our own culture or history. Engaging deeply with art carries risk: we might be moved, surprised, or discover strengths and vulnerabilities we didn't know. Meaning in art depends on this wide-awakeness; every interpretation involves stepping into the unknown and making room for surprise. Dewey believed that the experience of art spills over into ethical, political, and existential aspects of life[2]. Immersing ourselves in art makes us more alert and reflective, and more prepared to act and imagine new possibilities.

#### **5. Art and Emotion: The Power of Feeling**

Every genuine encounter with art is deeply emotional as much as it is intellectual. Whether we stand in front of a vast painting, listen to a haunting melody, or read lines of poetry that echo in our minds, we are moved not only in thought but in feeling. DeBolla powerfully expresses this when he writes that art brings us into contact with our emotions and memories, reaching far beyond surface enjoyment or the cultivated pleasures of "taste" [3]. The power of art lies precisely in its ability to touch something in us that is elemental and sometimes unspeakable, a capacity to evoke joy, surprise, sorrow, nostalgia, hope, or even discomfort. This sort of affective power often precedes intellectual understanding. Imagine standing before Mark Rothko's color field paintings, enveloped by the hazy borders and saturated tones. Before your thinking mind tries to "interpret," your body might register calmness or anxiety, and you may feel a rush of memory or a simple fascination that has no immediate explanation. The same holds true with music; a minor key may bring about a sense of longing or sadness, even if you cannot name why. This emotional reaction is not a weakness or limitation. On the contrary, it is precisely the fertile ground from which interpretation and understanding eventually grow.

Indeed, the process of making sense of art often begins in silence, in gestation. In the days or weeks after an encounter, our minds revisit the experience, and through talking with friends, reading about the work, or simply ruminating, those early emotional impressions start to take shape. Our feelings,

once vague, become stories we share; confusion gives way to curiosity, and curiosity grows into conversation. In this process, art acts as a catalyst for both personal growth and communal meaning-making. When we share a performance at the theater, a public mural, or a song that becomes a local anthem, our individual responses become enriched through exchange, anchoring art within a larger social experience. Perhaps one of the most reassuring aspects of the emotional power of art is that no two responses are ever quite the same. Personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and present moods shape how art strikes us, ensuring that each encounter is unique. This diversity is a strength, not a source of confusion, revealing the boundless potential of art to foster empathy and difference as well as unity.

## 6. Art as Self-Discovery: A Journey into the New

Art's insights don't end with emotional resonance. They offer powerful openings to self-discovery and transformation. At the heart of the aesthetic experience is the possibility for us to become more than who we were before. Art is an invitation, asking us to set aside fixed identities, habitual beliefs, and the routines that dull our awareness. 'Breaking through the crust,' to borrow John Dewey's phrase, is a process of awakening to new possibilities in ourselves and the world. Engagement with art often means facing complexity or difficulty [1]. The first encounter with a puzzling installation piece, perhaps a Damien Hirst vitrine or a perplexing performance, may provoke confusion, irritation, or even resistance. But as Greene suggests, this confusion is not a dead end; it is the doorway. It pushes us to ask deeper questions such as "Why do I feel unsettled?" or "What is this artwork asking me to think about my assumptions?" In the process, we begin to see ourselves with fresh eyes.

Art encourages this sense of becoming by calling us into imaginative play and projection. When we sympathize with a fictional character, or see ourselves in a portrait, or imagine being the creator of a mysterious sculpture, we loosen the hold that fixed roles have on us [5]. Art thus acts both as a mirror and a window, a place to recognize oneself and a place to envision what else might be possible. Each genuine encounter invites us to keep growing, adapting, and recreating our sense of self. This is not a solitary practice. When shared publicly in workshops, galleries, theaters, or on city streets, art offers the chance for collective questioning and mutual insight. Together, we learn that our identities are not set in stone; they are open, unfinished, and always capable of change.

## 7. Freedom and Structure in Artistic Encounters

An important aspect of engaging deeply with art lies in negotiating the balance between freedom and structure. Every work of art embodies both the intention and constraints of its maker and the freedom of the audience to respond. DeBolla asks us to consider how much meaning is inherent in the artwork itself, and how much is created by our active interpretation as viewers [3]. No painting or performance is experienced in the same way by all who encounter it; each carries layers of meaning shaped by context, history, and the interplay between artist and audience. This interplay is especially visible in participatory or interactive artworks. Take Sophie Calle's project "Take Care of Yourself," in which over one hundred women, the invitees, offered their responses to a breakup letter Calle had received. Some analyzed it as lawyers or linguists; others danced, sang, or wrote poetry. Calle's framework structured the project, but the freedom and unpredictability of each contribution turned the work into a vibrant tapestry of viewpoints, voices, and emotional registers. The meaning of the project unfolded not just from Calle's own experience but from the collective energy of all involved. Such works demonstrate that art is not about neat conclusions or passive consumption. Each encounter opens questions, arouses debate, and invites the viewer to become a participant in the making of meaning. This process sharpens our critical faculties. It forces us to negotiate ambiguity and plurality, and, in doing so, expands our understanding of both art and the broader world.

## **8. Art as Skillful Practice: Growing Through Engagement**

Deep involvement with art is not a gift reserved for the few but a practice anyone can develop. Researcher Alva Noë describes aesthetic appreciation and creation as forms of skilled activity, combining both perceptual and cognitive abilities [6]. These skills do not emerge fully formed, rather, they grow through sustained engagement and intentional practice. Whether we are painters mixing colors, musicians rehearsing scales, or viewers spending time in front of challenging art, we sharpen our abilities to notice subtle details, organize impressions, and make connections. Skillful engagement means slow looking, repeated effort, and the willingness to be puzzled as much as pleased. It is not simply about technical mastery but about cultivating a sensitivity that spills over into other dimensions of life. The beauty of these skills is their democratic character. They belong not just to artists or critics but to anyone who approaches art with attention, humility, and curiosity. By practicing art appreciation or creation, individuals foster capacities, like patience, flexibility, and openness to difference that strengthen emotional intelligence and relational awareness. Moreover, the practice of art teaches us to value process over product. Our abilities evolve as we return to artworks, revise our interpretations, and reflect on our responses. The skills we gain help us navigate life's complexities, handle ambiguity, and respond to unfamiliar situations with creativity and care.

## **9. Art and Social Connection: Building Community and Collective Life**

Art's influence radiates outward, shaping not just individual experience but collective life. Sociologist Carol Becker describes artists as “organic intellectuals,” who work at the intersection between private sensibility and public responsibility [1]. Artists often give form to fears, desires, and hopes that might otherwise go unspoken, helping to crystallize new ways of thinking or galvanizing social energy for action.

Art becomes a living part of communities in many forms. Music rallies crowds for protest, as seen when Cui Jian's “Nothing to My Name” became a “people's anthem” of hope. In moments of political and social tension, a mural might symbolize local heritage or resistance. Works of literature and film tell stories that help communities imagine new futures, repair histories, or process grief. The power of art in the social sphere lies in its ability to create spaces for dialogue, empathy, and transformation. Public performances, shared rituals, and communal programs use art to foster understanding between people of different backgrounds and generations. Art can unite, heal divisions, and open the imagination to common goals. However, as Becker acknowledges, art's influence is not invariably positive [1]. It can reinforce divisions, privilege certain voices, or become a tool for exclusion just as easily as for unity. Its power resides in making meanings public and contestable, inviting negotiation rather than enforcing consensus. Ultimately, art offers communities both a common language and a laboratory for new forms of living together. By embracing emotional depth, the journey of self-discovery, the productive tension between freedom and structure, the cultivation of new skills, and the possibility of collective meaning, art becomes not only a private pleasure but a foundation for vital, dynamic civic life. In each encounter, whether personal or communal, art continues to reveal and recreate what it means to be human.

## **10. Conclusion: Continuously Creating Meaning**

Entering the world of art invites us into a process of ongoing questioning and personal growth. As Dewey observed, truly understanding a work of art requires us to participate actively rather than remain passive observers. Art is not something fixed or lifeless; it is dynamic and constantly evolving as new people interact with it and bring their own perspectives. This kind of meaningful engagement with art calls for humility, skill, openness, and persistent effort. There is never just one final meaning

to an artwork, because every person experiences it differently, shaped by their own background, knowledge, and imagination. Through art, both individuals and communities take part in an ongoing dialogue; one that explores the past, engages with the present, and imagines possible futures. Museums, galleries, concert halls, and public spaces should not be seen as mere places where art is stored or displayed. Instead, they are experimental spaces where we can challenge and expand our ways of seeing and understanding. Deep experiences with art mean entering a continuous process of interpreting meaning, questioning value, and exploring feeling. By participating in these processes, we learn how to ask questions, empathize with others, adapt to new situations, imagine alternatives, and even act. These are all crucial qualities for navigating an often unpredictable and changing world. Ultimately, the value of art goes far beyond learning how to appreciate beauty or recognize style. Art cultivates creativity, ethical awareness, and the social skills required for individuals and communities to thrive. The ability to reimagine the ordinary is not merely a matter of aesthetic appreciation; it is a practice that encourages us to approach life with curiosity, courage, generosity, and hope. In this way, art offers a model for living more expansively and meaningfully, both for us and for the communities we belong to.

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