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1. Introduction

When writing about art, aestheticians tend to focus on the work of art and on the artist who produces it. When they refer to audiences, they typically speak only of the effect that the artwork has on its audience. Aestheticians pay little, if any, attention to the important active role that an audience plays in the workings of a healthy art world. My goal in this essay is to do something to end the neglect of the audience. I will focus on the role of the informed or, as I will call it, educated audience. I begin by subjecting the concept of an audience to some old-fashioned conceptual analysis. Once we are clearer about what an audience is and, in particular, what an educated audience is, we can begin to determine what it can do. In my view, an educated audience can play an important role in encouraging the production of artworks with high aesthetic value. Indeed, highly valuable artworks are unlikely to be produced without a broad educated audience to whom artists are responsive. Consequently, the aesthetic education of audiences is crucial to the health of an art world.

2. What Is an Audience?

In its original sense, the noun “audience” refers to the people within earshot of some speaker: one held forth to an audience. In connection with the arts, “audience” was first used in something very like this original sense. It referred to those who heard actors perform plays or those who heard the recitation of poetry. Soon the concept of an audience also applied to those who heard the performance of musical works. By the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of an audience had been broadened. It came to apply to the readers of a novel or other works of literature. More recently, the concept of an audience has been applied to those who view paintings, sculptures, and films.
Now an audience consists of people who experience artworks of any sort. Having an experience of an artwork is a necessary condition of being part of an audience. This condition is, however, far from being sufficient.

Some people experience works of art but are not part of an audience. Consider, for example, ushers in a concert hall or theater and guards in art museums. An usher hears the play or the concerto but may not regard it as an aesthetic object. Similarly, a guard sees the paintings (and so in this sense experiences them) but does not, perhaps, attend to them as aesthetic objects. Or consider a person who arranges to meet a friend in a gallery. He almost certainly sees the paintings, but he will not count as part of an audience if he is completely intent on looking for his friend. It seems, then, that members of an audience do not simply experience artworks. They must experience artworks in a certain way.

Audience members experience an artwork in such a way that they are able to benefit from its aesthetic value. When I speak of “aesthetic value,” I mean the value an artwork possesses in virtue of its sensuous properties. I will not here take a stand on the nature of experience of aesthetic value. Some writers have suggested that the contemplation of art involves a distinctive sort of experience. Perhaps it does. (It has been suggested, for example, that audience members must have a measure of “psychical distance” from some object if they are to have an aesthetic experience of it.) I simply hold that audience members experience an artwork in whatever way makes it possible for them to benefit from its aesthetic value. If aesthetic value causes pleasure (or “aesthetic emotion,” understanding, or anything else) then audience members can have pleasure caused in them by an artwork’s aesthetic value. The capacity to benefit from the aesthetic value of an artwork is a necessary condition of being part of the work’s audience.

Notice that not just anyone can be part of the audience for a given work of art. Audience members must possess certain capacities. In the most basic sense of the word, an audience is composed of the people who hear someone. Clearly, not everyone can be part of an audience in this sense of the word. Only people who can hear can be part of the audience of musical performances. More generally, the audience of any artwork must possess certain capacities. Obviously, blind people cannot be part of the audience of painting. Less obviously, people may need to be familiar with certain facts about art history, styles, and so on to be part of a work’s audience. If someone is completely unfamiliar with, for example, classical music, he may be unable to experience the works of Mozart in such a way that he benefits from their aesthetic value. I will refer to someone who has the capacity, sensory and intellectual, to appreciate the aesthetic value of the work as being part of the educated audience of a work.

A crucial question in the next part of this essay concerns whether artists ought to be responsive to a broad audience or recognize only other artists
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(and perhaps some others) as qualified (that is, educated enough) to assess their work. Some artists have taken the view that a broad audience is not educated and therefore not competent to pass judgment on the works they produce. These artists believe that the views of the broad audience can be ignored. As we will see, an analogy is drawn between the educated audience for artworks and those qualified to judge scientific work. The only competent judges of scientific work are specialists in a scientific subdiscipline. In other words, the educated audience for scientific work consists of other scientists. Similarly, one might think, the educated audience for artworks consists of only artists and other specialists. Perhaps at the heart of the issue I want to address is a dispute about how broad educated audiences can be.

The first point to make, in addressing this issue, is that the parallel between assessing scientific research and evaluating works of art is flawed. Many people who are not artists or professional critics are perfectly able to determine the aesthetic value of an artwork. I think that I am a pretty typical audience member. I can no more paint a masterpiece or pen a great novel than I can write an article for the Journal of Atmospheric and Solar-Terrestrial Physics or the Journal of Algebraic Geometry. I am, however, perfectly competent to judge the aesthetic value of many paintings, compositions, and works of literature in a wide range of styles and genres. In contrast, I am not competent to judge the scientific value of any article in any scientific journal.

This difference is attributable to differing ways in which we are aware of aesthetic and scientific value. We discover scientific value by a process of reasoning. If one has not been trained in certain rational processes, one will be unable to assess the scientific value of certain scientific works. Reason also plays a role in the discovery of aesthetic value, but in large part aesthetic value is discovered by sensory experience and emotional response. Even if one does not have the skills needed to create works of aesthetic value, one can have the capacity to sense it. One may acquire this capacity simply by experiencing works of art. Those people who regularly form part of the audience for a particular category of artwork, and who, consequently, can recognize aesthetic value in some class of artworks, belong to what I will call a broad educated audience. So, for example, the broad educated audience for novels is composed of those people who regularly read and have an aesthetic experience of novels.

I have just indicated the sense in which the broad educated audience is educated: its members regularly have aesthetic experiences of some category of artworks. That it is educated is important. That it is broad is also crucial. As I am using the term here, a “broad audience” need not be huge, but it needs to be sufficiently large that it consists mainly of individuals who are not personally invested in the success of the artists whose works they assess. The members of this audience are (at least for the most part)
disinterested in the sense that their only interest in experiencing artworks is the aesthetic experience that they afford. They are not motivated by a desire for the approval of an artist, or by desire to be included in a coterie. They are too numerous for all to belong to the coterie. The audience for, say, early music is an example of a broad educated audience. The number of individuals who, in the course of a year, attend a performance of early music or buy an early music recording is quite small—likely not more than a few percent of the general population in most cities. Yet these individuals probably hear many performances or recordings a year (so they are educated). And most of them are not professional musicians and do not stand to benefit except aesthetically from hearing the music for whom they form the audience (so the audience is, in the relevant sense, broad).

I have conceded that an educated audience member needs to have some familiarity with a style or genre in order to be able to assess its aesthetic value. The sort of knowledge one needs to be part of the educated audience for a type of artwork is, however, quite different from the sort of knowledge one needs to be part of the educated audience for science. In the sciences, one has to undergo special training in order to be able to acquire the expertise to assess the value of scientific work. In the arts, however, one acquires the capacity to assess works in a particular style or genre primarily by experiencing works of that sort. Virtually everyone can develop the capacity to appreciate works of a certain sort, and almost everyone can do so fairly rapidly. This is not the case in the sciences.

I do not deny that a broad educated audience lacks certain capacities that artists or professional critics possess. Members of a broad educated audience often lack the capacity to explain in detail why certain works have a particular degree of aesthetic value. Such individuals may have difficulty making fine-grained distinctions (that is, they have even more difficulty than the most expert critic has). Still, members of a broad educated audience (taken as a whole) are capable of providing artists with an excellent sounding board for their work.

3. The Role of Audiences

I turn now to a consideration of the conditions under which aesthetically valuable works of art are most likely to be produced and the contribution audiences make to these conditions. Artists need to receive feedback on the aesthetic value of their work. An art world in which artists are responsive to a broad educated audience provides the sort of conditions that are conducive to the production of aesthetically valuable art. An art world in which artists ignore or, worse, are contemptuous of broad audiences is less likely to see the production of valuable art.

Some sort of mechanism for judging aesthetic value is essential in any well-functioning art world. We need some sort of process for encouraging
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artists when they are successfully producing good works of art and offering criticism when their efforts are unsuccessful. My suggestion is that a broad educated audience ought to be regarded as judges of what is aesthetically valuable and artists ought to be responsive to a broad educated audience. That is, an artist ought to respect the judgment of such audiences as providing a good estimate of his work’s aesthetic value.

This view has not met with favor in some quarters. Tristan Tzara, for example, wrote that “Art is a private affair, the artist produces it for himself.” He believed that the Dada artist ought to have no regard at all for an audience. Indeed, the audience is treated with contempt: “The artist, the poet rejoice at the venom of the masses.”\(^1\) David Smith, the prominent American sculptor, adopts a similar view. He holds that “Nobody understands art but the artist,” and, far from needing an audience who can judge works, “The artist deserves to be belligerent to the majority.”\(^2\) Both Tzara and Smith apparently think that the audience has no important role to play in an art world. It is hard to blame artists for such an attitude. As Jeffrey Mark noted, “During the whole period of his studentship the artist is warned on all sides to avoid a natural instinct to please his public. He is told that success in art is the usual sign of inferiority.”\(^3\)

Audiences have returned the compliment by staying away in droves. As I will note below, disregard for audiences is very common among composers of contemporary art music. Not coincidentally, you could set off a bomb at most performances of new music and not kill enough people to make a CNN broadcast. Attendance at art galleries specializing in avant-garde art is also disappointing. (Some of galleries have recently been at the center of controversy because they have mounted shows that bring in audiences but are seen as pandering to the public.) A dance writer recently noted that in New York City the audience for experimental dance consists of “Basically other dancers who seem to take masochistic pleasure in the hate and apathy spewed at them from their friends on stage.”\(^4\) But it was not always so. Great art has, in the past, often enjoyed a broad audience. Collingwood was only idealizing a little when he wrote of the time “when Cimabue’s Madonna went through the streets of Florence, or . . . when London society fell to quarrelling about the merits of Handel and Buononcini.”\(^5\) During the reign of Napoleon III, as many as one million people visited the Salon in the course of six weeks, many times what any contemporary exhibition draws.\(^6\) In the lifetime of Reynolds, three hundred thousand people a year went to the annual exhibition at the Royal Academy, even though a large part of London’s population would have found the price of admission (a shilling, and later two and six) prohibitively expensive. I regard the loss of broad audiences as a serious problem.

In an efficient art world, artists cannot be left to assess their works for themselves. The trouble is that artists are not reliable judges of their own work. This is not merely an empirical claim about the capacity of artists; it
Young is also a conceptual claim, as the following reflections reveal. The poetaster or dauber who judges that his work is great may be in a state of mind phenomenologically indistinguishable from accomplished artists who make the same judgment about their work. My point here is Wittgensteinian. An aesthetic judgment is a move in a language game. To judge that an artwork is valuable cannot merely be to think that it is valuable. As Wittgenstein says, “To think that one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. . . . it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.”7 If we hope to get anything like accurate assessments of works of art (as is required in a healthy art world), works must be exposed to critical scrutiny in a public manner. The only question is whether this scrutiny is to be supplied by experts or a broad audience. I take it that Wittgenstein would allow that some language games are played by everyone and others only by experts.

In the hope of answering my question about the conditions under which aesthetically valuable works of art are produced, I will begin by considering a more general question: What sort of system is most conducive to the production of any valuable item? Let us consider the system for the production of toasters that is most likely to result in the production of valuable toasters. When I speak of a valuable toaster, I mean a toaster that performs well the function of toasters. Such a toaster is able to toast a variety of breads, reliably toast bread to varying degrees, and so on. Perhaps it has certain aesthetic features: for example, it looks good on the kitchen counter. I suggest that in the most efficient system for the production of toasters, both toaster manufacturers and toaster consumers have crucial roles to play. The role of toaster manufacturers is to produce toasters that perform well the function of toasters. The role of toaster consumers is to purchase only toasters that perform this function well. Unless both manufacturers and consumers perform their functions well, the system will break down and good toasters will not be produced.

The demand of toaster consumers for good toasters gives toaster manufacturers an important incentive to produce good appliances. People who actually use toasters to toast bread are the best judges of whether a toaster is a good one. This point bears repeating: the people who toast bread regularly are the best judges of toasters. Once this is recognized, we have a recipe for successful toaster production. The manufacturers want to sell toasters and buyers want to buy good ones, so the manufacturers will make an effort to make good toasters. This is the optimal situation for the production of good toasters.

The situation could break down in two ways. (Please do not understand me as offering an apology for an unconstrained market.) First, the toaster consumers could become preoccupied by something other than acquiring good toasters. Perhaps they become unreasonably prejudiced against toasters made by certain manufacturers or in certain countries. Perhaps
they care only that toasters are cheap and do not worry that they are able to perform well the full range of toaster functions. Or perhaps consumers are simply ignorant of all that a toaster can do (perhaps they do not know about bagels, for example, and the need for toasters to accommodate them). If the consumers fail in one of these ways, manufacturers will be able to get away with producing poor-quality toasters.

Another less optimal situation is one in which toaster makers are trying to please a constituency other than the group of people planning to toast bread. Imagine, for example, a situation in which toaster manufacturers did not actually have to sell any toasters. Their sole goal was to impress their fellow toaster manufacturers. It is likely that they would try to produce toasters that stand out from the herd. They might produce original and remarkable items, but they could easily lose sight of the function of toasters. Appliances that are actually good for toasting bread may not be produced.

A parallel point could be made about the production of artworks. Artworks have a function: they provide valuable aesthetic experiences. In a well-functioning art world, audiences (and, in particular, what I have called broad educated audiences) have a crucial role to play in encouraging the production of works able to perform this function. They ought to pay careful attention to the aesthetic properties of artworks and praise and support the work of only those artists who produce works with high aesthetic value, just as toaster consumers ought to be discerning about toasters. Audiences ought not to be prejudiced against works of art for extraneous reasons, such as the national origin of the artists who produce them. Artists also have a role to play vis-à-vis audiences. Like toaster manufacturers, they ought to take seriously the verdict of a broad educated audience. If toaster manufacturers had contempt for the views of toaster users, toasters likely would not perform well the functions required by toaster users. Similarly, if artists do not respect the aesthetic judgments of a broad educated audience, the artworks they produce are unlikely to perform well the function of artworks, namely, to provide valuable aesthetic experiences.

Yet many artists, for the past century, have not made any effort to cater to an audience. This is a change from earlier times. Jeffrey Mark noted that

Wagner and Shakespeare both wrote for the uninitiated. . . . The case of Shakespeare or Wagner is capable of a crude explanation if we say that they simply worked upon the fundamental economic principle of supply and demand. Now, however, we have chosen to reverse the order of things, and efforts are made to create a demand for the supply. Artists work out the old problem in a blissfully self-centered manner, and having produced the finished article, tell the public that this is what it ought to want.8

This is no way to run an art world.

Let me make clear that I am not suggesting that artists ought to pander to an audience. On the contrary, I believe that each artist ought to follow his
own genius and produce what he thinks best; however, artists ought then to submit their work to a broad educated audience and take seriously the verdict of such an audience. However certain an artist may have felt about his success in producing aesthetically valuable works, a negative verdict from a broad educated audience ought to be occasion for reassessment.

I take as a paradigm of a poorly functioning art world the contemporary classical music scene. Many contemporary composers have no interest in presenting music that a broad audience will find worthwhile. I have heard them speak contemptuously of relatively popular composers (such as Philip Glass or Steve Reich) as composers of “ear candy.” Composers do not owe their income to audience appreciation of their music. Virtually all contemporary composers have academic positions. They are content to perform to small audiences because their livelihood does not depend on ticket sales. They have no economic motive for pleasing an audience. And, in fact, attendance at new music performances is typically quite small. Consequently, the artistic results have been disappointing.

The argument for my views on the importance of audiences has a controversial premise. That certain artists have had disdain for their audiences is uncontroversial. The controversial claim is that this disdain has resulted in the production of bad art. If you believe that people will look back at the past fifty years of art music as one of the great eras, you will find my argument less convincing. I find it very unlikely, however, that we have just lived through a period of composition comparable to that in which Bach, Corelli, Handel, Scarlatti, Rameau, and Telemann flourished. It is astounding to think that all of these composers were contemporaries. Neither, I think, is the period anything like Vienna circa 1800, where Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven flourished. (Notice that all of these composers had a broad audience. All of them sold music to a wide audience, and many of them performed their work for a broad and appreciative public.) So, granting for the sake of argument that the contemporary music art world has not been a rich source of musical masterpieces, we can ask why this may be.

I suggest that the fact that artists are not responsive to a broad educated audience is a large part of the explanation. Certainly parts of the music world are flourishing. The performance of music composed before 1900 has never attained higher standards. The performance of early music is thriving and commands an increasingly large audience. Certain elements of popular music are also flourishing. In the course of the last, say, seventy-five years, the achievements of popular musicians (particularly in the areas of jazz and blues) have been much greater than anything achieved by composers in the “classical” tradition. (That said, certain types of jazz also have been plagued by contempt toward its audience.) Not coincidentally, performers of old classical music and popular music both command a broad educated audience because they need to be responsive to their audience.
I think that we find a model of a well-functioning art world in the contemporary literary world. We are living through one of the great flourishes of the novel. In the English-speaking world we find at work such important literary artists as Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Anita Brookner, A. S. Byatt, Margaret Drabble, Don Delillo, V. S. Naipaul, Michael Ondaatje, Richard Russo, and a host of others. Each of these authors is able to command a broad audience of educated readers. I suggest that a desire to find an audience of educated readers has an impact on what these authors write. They do not slavishly cater to the lowest common denominator. None of them is Patricia Cornwell. Nevertheless, they make an effort to entertain and engage a broad educated audience. If they did not do so, their sales would fall and they might even find themselves dropped by their publishers. None of them, we can be sure, wants that. Without their audiences, they likely would not be writing the novels they are now. They probably would be working in a carwash or teaching creative writing seminars.

As I noted earlier, the optimal conditions for the manufacture of toasters can break down in one of two ways. The toaster manufacturers can cease to regard the views of toaster consumers, or the judgment of toaster consumers can become debased. Up to this point I have focused on the first sort of problem in the art world, but the second problem can also exist. The taste of audience members can be not good enough for them to play the regulative role that they need to perform in a healthy art world. In other words, a broad educated audience may not exist for a given category of artwork. Often this will be the result of a failure of aesthetic education. I do not necessarily mean formal aesthetic education; rather, the audience may simply not have been exposed to enough examples of good work in some category. I have no doubt that this second sort of breakdown has occurred in segments of the contemporary art world. Nevertheless, the more serious problem in the contemporary art world is the contempt of the artist for those outside his cenacle.

4. The Case for the Expert

Not everyone agrees that artists ought to be responsive to broad audiences. Milton Babbitt is famous, or notorious, for having taken a view contrary to mine in his article “Who Cares If You Listen?” (The title was not Babbitt’s, but the sentiment was.) In this essay Babbitt expressed the view that the isolation of the modern composer from the audience “is not only inevitable, but potentially advantageous for the composer and his music.”10 The isolation of the composer from the layman is inevitable, he says, because the layman cannot be “other than bored and puzzled by what he is unable to understand.”11 Still, this isolation is good, we are told, because the composer does not need to be guided by what will be of interest to a lay audience.
Instead the artist can be guided by the educated opinion of his peers. Just as the theoretical physicist disregards the opinions of those ignorant of physics, the artist can disregard the opinion of the uneducated listener.

I have already explained why a healthy art world will not set up artists as the sole judges of the aesthetic value of their artworks (as Smith and Tzara apparently think would be fine). Now we need to come to grips with the suggestion that a small group of experts ought to be set up as the arbiters of what is aesthetically valuable. The question may be formulated in these terms: Are artists likely to receive a more accurate assessment of the value of their work from specialists or from a broad educated audience?

Initially it may seem that specialists will be more reliable judges. One may find persuasive Babbitt’s analogy between the artist and the scientist. In evaluating this suggestion, we need to reflect on the question of who the specialist is. It is here that the analogy that Babbitt draws begins to break down. The analogy that Babbitt draws between the physicist and his peers and the artist and his peers is one that he is not entitled to make. In the realm of physics, we have an independent standard for identifying the specialist. In physics we decide whether or not someone is a specialist in physics by reference to what is (taken to be) scientific truth. That is, we have an objective standard by which we can judge someone’s claim to be an expert. One might wonder whether a similar standard exists for determining who is and who is not a specialist in the realm of the arts. Babbitt himself rejects the view that there is. He ridicules the idea that there are “criteria of Absolute Good” in music (and, by extension, other arts). He suggests that some art is good by the standards of laymen and other art is good by the standards of the specialist. He gives us no reason to think that one set of standards is any better than another. A multiplicity of standards does not exist in physics, however; there is only physics that is good by reference to what is true and physics that is not. I do not accept the sort of thoroughgoing relativism about aesthetic standards that Babbitt and others apparently accept, but I will not argue against it here. I simply point out the inconsistency of adopting this sort of relativism and comparing the artist to the scientist.

The analogy between the scientist and the artist breaks down in other ways. In the sciences, experts judge work, and it might be thought that a similar approach could work in the arts. The difference, of course, is that in the sciences, peer review of work is double blind. Sometimes blind review is possible in the art world. Applications for grants-in-aid can be anonymously refereed. Often, however, evaluation of artworks simply cannot be done blindly. The art world is simply too different from the world of science. In the sciences, works do not see the light of day before they have been blindly reviewed. In the art world, however, works are typically signed and their authorship is widely known when they are sent out into the world. The only prior review has been by an artist’s friends and colleagues. Since the review is not blind, however, we do not have good reason to believe that
works before the public will be good. If you do not believe this, consider all of the lousy artworks you have seen and heard over the years. Nothing in the initial review by the artists’ peers stopped these works from appearing in public. (The situation is different with literary works, of course. They are carefully reviewed prior to publication and will only get into print if some publisher believes that they will find favor with a broad audience. This goes a good deal of the way toward explaining the health of the literary art world.)

Anyone who thinks that artists can dispense with the response of an audience has overlooked another essential difference between art and science. The aim of both the scientist and the artist is (or ought to be) to benefit the public. Scientists do not need to have a broad audience to have this effect. It matters not in the least that the public cannot read the *New England Journal of Medicine* or *Nature*; the public can still reap the benefits of good medical science or improvements in our understanding of climate change. If, however, artists care only for a coterie of their peers, the public does not benefit. They can only benefit from artworks if they are part of the audience to whom the artist caters. When art has no broad audience, it has lost a good deal of its point. If artists retreat to a cenacle and care not for a broad audience, they are no better than philosophers, many of whom make no effort to make their thoughts accessible to an educated public.

I have other reasons for thinking that artists are unwise to seek the approbation of only a small circle of fellow artists. The first is that if the reaction of a broad educated audience is not taken seriously, there is a grave danger that artists will become cliquish and that cronyism will rule the art world. This is dangerous for several reasons. For a start, when the judgment of only a few people exerts excessive influence over what is judged good (and consequently produced), there is an increased chance that facts about who knows whom will have an impact on what is considered good. There is also an increased chance that quirky individual tastes will have an undue influence on the production of art. Charismatic individuals can have an undeserved influence on what is considered aesthetically valuable if the cenacle is the judge. In contrast, when a broad audience judges a work, individual preferences cancel each other out. Consequently, there is a good chance that works that win the approval of a broad educated audience are good by an independent standard.

The more diverse the audience that a work can command, the more likely it is a work of high aesthetic value. Often we hear that great works of art have stood the test of time, but this is not true. Time does not test anything. Audiences are the test of works of art. Over time, however, a work of art can be presented to a wide array of audiences, and, if it meets with approval from successive audiences, the chances that it is a valuable work of art are very good. The broader the audience that passes judgment on a work, the less likely that the judgment is the product of individual prejudice. This is
Hume’s point when he wrote that

the same HOMER, who pleased at ATHENS and ROME two thousand years ago, is still admired at PARIS and at LONDON. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator, but his reputation will never be durable or general.\(^1\)

Epistemologists who have reflected on the value of many inquirers support my view here. Consider, for example, the Condorcet Jury Theorem. Suppose that we have a group of people and the members of a group have a better than even chance of making the right choice when presented with two answers to a question, one right and one wrong. According to this theorem, the larger the group, the more likely the verdict of the group as a whole will be the right answer. What I have said previously is evidence that members of a broad educated audience are more likely than not to determine whether or not a given work of art has a high degree of aesthetic value. So consider the binary choice between “Pride and Prejudice is a great work of art” and “Pride and Prejudice is not a great work of art.” Even though certain experts within the art world will judge that the latter is true, a broad educated audience will arrive at the right verdict. Similarly with verdicts about bad works of art. The inability of some genre of artworks to develop a broad educated audience indicates a problem with the genre, not with the audience.

The second sort of reason why artists ought to be responsive to audiences is that only in this way can an art world avoid academism. Here I use the word “academism” in the Oxford English Dictionary’s sense of “conforming too rigidly to the principles (in painting, etc.) of an academy.” Those who think that the artist ought not to be responsive to an audience regard this as a propaedeutic that will lead to innovation in the arts. The empirical evidence suggests that just the opposite is true. Particularly if we take seriously the analogy between art and science, we should recall Max Planck’s famous pronouncement on scientific change: “An important scientific innovation rarely makes its way by gradually winning over and converting its opponents: it rarely happens that Saul becomes Paul. What does happen is that its opponents gradually die out and that the growing generation is familiarized with the idea from the beginning.”\(^1\) Old artists and old critics are just as inflexible as old scientists. In this context we should remember the suspicion of innovation of the French Academicians at the end of the nineteenth century. We ought also to recall Clement Greenberg’s opposition to change in the New York art world. Thus, I do not think that there is any prima facie reason to think that an audience of “experts” will encourage innovation more than a broad educated one.

What drives innovation in the arts is the evolution of the taste, interests, and needs of audiences. This point can be illustrated by a few examples. In
the Middle Ages, artists were not responsive to a broad educated audience. Their work was governed by tradition and the expectations of the Catholic Church. In consequence, artistic styles changed slowly. When we get to the Renaissance, in contrast, artists are creating works for a broad educated audience (which included some princes of the church). As a result, stylistic changes start to happen rapidly. Caravaggio was born barely sixty years after Botticelli died, and yet his style is radically different. Or consider the rapid changes in popular music over the past fifty years. These changes are related to social changes and to changes in the taste of audiences. Many compositions by contemporary academic composers would not have sounded out of place had they been written a half century ago. When art is removed from the concerns of audiences—when it is something purely academic—the drive for innovation is removed.

One might think that the tradition of avant-garde visual art over the past century demonstrates that art can evolve rapidly without artists being responsive to a broad audience. As a rule, artists who identify themselves as avant-garde do not care much for a broad audience. And, one might think, the period (stretching back roughly a century) during which the avant-garde has been prominent has been a period of rapid stylistic change. After all, we have seen the rapid succession of fauvism, cubism, futurism, dada, suprematism, neoplasticism, abstract expressionism, pop art, op art, conceptual art, postmodernism, minimalism, and a host of other schools. As I have argued elsewhere, however, there is actually a remarkable stylistic consistency to the avant-garde over the past hundred years.14

A style is simply a class of artworks with some property in common. A characteristic property possessed by any avant-garde artwork is the property of being as unlike as possible artworks that were produced immediately before it. This difference from others is a formal property and, in general, avant-garde art has been formalist. (Some avant-garde artists, such as Piet Mondrian and Barnett Newman, thought of themselves as representational painters. I take it as obvious that they were not.) Each of the schools I listed above is just a substyle of the avant-garde style. So, while the period during which audiences do not matter to many visual artists has superficially seemed to be a period of constant innovation, in fact it has been dominated by an academic style. Artists who adhere to this style—and those who adhere to academism—have limited artistic options. So, for example, we get “neo-geo” and abstract expressionism, yet again.

Any academic style becomes obsessed with technique and style at the expense of artistic expression. Freed from the discipline imposed by the need to win an audience, artists try to outdo each other in the technical aspects of their style. When the style demands constant newness, artists simply produce works with the property of newness, regardless of anything else.
5. Conclusion

The republic of art (T. J. Diffey’s name for an art world), like any other republic, is better off if it is democratic. Right now many art worlds are oligarchies or, worse, plutocracies. Undemocratic art worlds, ones in which approval of broad educated audiences is not regarded as a test of an artwork’s quality, are not ones in which we should expect the production of good art.

If we want to improve the quality of art, a good way to begin is by first improving the quality of art’s audience. Aesthetic education often focuses on how individual members of the audience benefit from being given an aesthetic education. If I am right, there is another reason for aesthetic education. The cultivation of a broad educated audience is the first step toward encouraging the production of aesthetically valuable art. Any art world needs audience members who have confidence in their judgments and who are not willing to support an artist whose work they do not find to be aesthetically valuable. Something must also be done to change the attitude of artists to audiences. Success in the eyes of a broad educated audience must cease to be anathema to artists.

NOTES

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11. Ibid., 39.

