



Viewpoint Mike Smith

What is art? Mike Smith adds his thoughts to this eternal question by referring to an infamous century-old work

I was recently reading Alain Stephen's thought-provoking *Why We Think the Things We Think: Philosophy in a Nutshell* (2017) which posed the endlessly provocative question 'What is art?' Well, because it's beautiful and pleasing is a common starting point, although the question then becomes – what is beautiful? However Eugène Véron went further and said that art is the expression of human ideas and emotions. As a photographer that really struck a chord with me, although it left a slight taste in the mouth because there are clearly some highly regarded photographs that I don't like (and to get a sense of the breadth of the photographic canon, just look back over some of Roger Hicks's 'Final Analysis' columns).

Leo Tolstoy developed this argument further by suggesting that good art is able to successfully communicate ideas or emotions, whilst bad art isn't. I like that – as an argument it has a few holes in it, not least the proposition of 'I know what I like' – but in fact I like it because I can relate to it as a photographer, being both a consumer and creator of art. I can look at a photo and decide whether I like it, but I can also try to understand the idea, message or emotion that is being communicated to me and whether it is successful at doing that. And I like Roger's columns because they not only make me think about what is being communicated, but remind me that Roger and I only partially see the same things. There is much we see that does not overlap.

Future generations

And perhaps that is what is fascinating about photography as art. The image at best presents a singularity, at worst is entirely deceptive and is usually ambiguous. And those ideas are not only constrained by the background and social mores of the photographer, but also the viewer. Which explains why photos can be seen as bad art when they are first captured, but may well be viewed as good art by later generations.

Alain Stephen's article finishes by pointing the reader to Duchamp's 'Fountain', a piece of art that I hadn't, until that point, come across. This was submitted by Marcel Duchamp to the



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If Marcel Duchamp and Alfred Stieglitz can do it... is Mike's image as artistically valid?

'I can look at a photo and decide whether I like it, but I can also try to understand the idea'

Society of Independent Artists 1917 exhibition in New York (go and look at the Wikipedia page before reading on).

Yes, that really is a urinal – Duchamp supposedly purchased this from his local B&Q (or Manhattan equivalent) and submitted it in protest (and as a social commentary, aka waste products!) on art at the time. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Society didn't display it and its final resting place is unknown. It is actually the photograph of 'Fountain' which people know the artwork by, although what fascinated me was that it was taken by Alfred Stieglitz (by then well-established) at his gallery 291. The photograph has replaced the artwork and, along the way, metamorphosed the idea with its own embellishments and connotations. Viewing this image above, what does this say to you about art and photography?

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