Parsing the Good

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When we look at the creative work in the commercial world we find, salted here and there in among the ordinary, some good work and also a little really good work. We all notice this, we like it. But if we look around out beyond the reaches of the commercial, out in the realm of art, we find work we all know is….some other kind of good altogether. It's work that stays with us, opens us to other things, renews our sense of the world. Call it capital G Good. That it exists really intrigues me, perhaps because the mystery of making it is so deep, and because its implications of universality are so great. Though I don't pretend to understand how this work comes to be, I spend a huge amount of time thinking about it, trying to puzzle how really good art work arises.

When I hear myself talking about almost platonic kind of Good I sound to myself like a pie-eyed innocent. In this difficult age of ours (which I suppose is arguably no more so than Plato's) the notion that there is Good can seem incredibly naïve. But I'm talking about art, and art doesn't stand apart from our reality. Instead it lets us see into reality in a way that nothing else quite does, and its goodness depends on how well it does that, even though a specific artwork can be difficult, thorny, annoying as well as beautiful. Its effect is that after we see it we're not quite the same person we were before. Much more about this later.

Of course, thinking about art is like thinking about smoke. When you try to break it down to its components they blur and drift back across one another. But in general art, working in the way it does, offers us insights in a way that is the opposite of analysis. It starts with a small piece of existence and by concentrating on it enlarges it into a kind of gateway to…everything else. A really good painting, a piece of music, a poem or novel or sculpture, provokes a different kind of understanding than analysis does, a larger, unifying awareness of objects, lives, atmospheres, even things that could exist but don't.

When its good, then, art is not a decoration or a possession but a powerful means of understanding. And the idea that there is some way we might recognize what's good in art and understand how it does its work—that's surely a thought worth following. We have some satisfactions from our commercial work, but they're limited and short-lived. How much more interesting is this thing that operates to get us out beyond what we know, out where we can begin to encompass life and the universe, being and becoming. Whew! I mean, doesn't that sound more interesting than coming up with three new layouts by tomorrow's meeting?

To be sure our creative commercial work occurs in the vicinity of art and partakes of some of its techniques and qualities. But there's a sense in which commercial work is done at the back door, while the real stuff that gives Art its capital A goes on

deep inside the house. So that's where I went looking for some understanding. Perhaps, I thought, we can find a way to bring it back out to the porch with us to use when we do our commercial work.

Or we might just want to contrive to stay inside. In any case, the investigation might help us recall who we are.

Ways of Intelligence

The first step in this investigation looks at how intelligence relates to making art. We have ways of working at art that are simply not measured by the predominant linguistic and mathematical tests of intelligence, but that are real and central to making it. Howard Gardner, a Harvard educator and a McArthur Fellow, calls them multiple intelligences, in his book of the same name.

For example, we have the body-kinesthetic intelligence that is the province of the dancer and the athlete. It lets one know, without calculating, just when to release a ball toward a basket that is behind one's back while moving through the air, or how to sculpt a perfect shape with the body for a split-second with a dance partner, or how to move the mind's eye through a space to construct a shot for a film. Outside the realm of art it also serves the sailor, the surgeon, and the engineer.

Because intelligence tests don't measure this capability we don't tend to call it intelligence, but Gardner argues that we should. In his expanded list of intelligences he also cites the interpersonal (directors), intrapersonal (novelists), musical (composers and musicians), along with the more familiar verbal (poets) and the mathematical (scientists). None of these intelligences excludes any other. To the contrary, they interact in complex (and beautiful) ways, and once they're enumerated it seems clear that both making and apprehending art would call on several of them at any time.

Useful Obsession

Herman Melville wrote that sadness starts with having no great enterprise. The opposite of sadness, which I think would be more engagement than happiness, lies in having some question, some creative obsession, a kind of a bright thing that seems to inhabit one and drive one to creative action. It seems that if the artist doesn't have such an enterprise, he searches one out or coasts to a stop. This suggests a deep anti-entropic impulse in humankind. We're built to do this, and to work at it hard.

I almost wrote that doing art work makes us "feel good," but by most accounts "good" is not really what artists feel when they work. There's a fantasy that really good artists experience work as a serene and exhilarating progression, but all reports suggests that its more like staggering between the poles of anxiety and drudgery. I've looked at art that would thrill me if I'd made it, and I know that the artist felt nothing but the struggle. And apparently it never ends. W.H. Auden said, "A poet thinks he's a poet when he's putting the last touches on a new poem. The moment before he's a potential poet, the moment after he's one who has ceased to write poetry, perhaps forever."

Maybe it’s sad that artists never get the same enjoyment that others get from what they do. Maybe it’s not. I don’t know. But I’ve read so many artists describing the work as difficult (Van Gogh described it as "coal miner’s work"), that it occurs to me that the difficulty and dissatisfaction may be, perversely, a part of what drives one on to new work.

As an aside, it must also be true that the artist gets something from a work that no one else does. A sense of parentage of a creation, for one thing, and exhilarating views of the process that are hidden within the later work. For example, I have a friend who makes sculpture by pouring molten glass into matrices fashioned of found objects of old wood, metals, stone, etc. The results are stunning in a gallery, but only she gets to glimpse them first through the burst of flame and the roiling clouds of acrid smoke that accompany the exact—and uncertain—moment when the hot glass meets the matrix and becomes something that transcends material and idea. (Or, occasionally, doesn’t.)

One can’t help but notice that there’s also something about working intensely that is exhilarating, recalling a runner's high. It levens the difficulty. Perhaps working hard and deeply releases the same pleasure-inducing endorphins that running does, energizing us and bringing a craving for more endorphins.

So if our work doesn’t make us happy, then what do get from it? Perhaps a level of satisfaction that doesn’t satisfy us quite enough, perhaps a strange moment of separation and pride when this creative thing that was born in us goes out on its own path through the world. As Carl Van Doren once said, at a certain point a poem no longer belongs to the person who wrote it but to the person who reads it. When I first heard that I thought, "Fortunate readers," but now I also sympathize with the poem’s bereft parent.

Intention as Power

In the only certifiably AHA! moment I’ve ever had about making art, I learned that when an artist goes at his work with ferocious focus and power, that very power attracts. And that attraction embeds itself in the work itself and draws in others who come in contact with it. This realization came from an experiment I did with a photography class I was teaching, and when it hit me it was like a flash of lightening illuminating an unexpected landscape.

Here is the experiment: I asked a friend, Alan Arkin, to come and lead some theater exercises with my class. We all spent the morning doing various improvisations and theater games, and it was quite delicious to see photographers pushed out of their cherished observer position and made to interact with each other. But the thing that at once became strikingly clear was that when an "actor" really committed to his part in a scene, when he set self-consciousness aside and became the game—the whole game, all its parts—the very intensity of the commitment itself brought the whole game alive. And if one person did this strongly, the other actors followed that person into the game. And when that happened the spectators followed too, and the scene shifted and became reality for everyone.

On the other hand, if just one of the actors couldn't make that act of imaginative commitment to it, if he felt foolish and kept slipping out of it—asides and jokes to the audience, that kind of thing—the game stopped and the whole imaginative structure crashed to the ground like a dying kite.

The power of this focus is easily visible in actor's work because they do it in front of us. Take a look at De Niro, or Streep, or Arkin. They can just stare into the air and you'll wait and watch them, watch their very intensity, try to see what they're thinking, what they'll do next. It's what makes great actors great.

But afterward as I thought about the revelations of the class, I saw a more subtle correlation with photography and all the arts. I realized that all the best artists I know, in any medium, have that same intensity. Their energy alone creates an artistic reality and engages us in what they're doing, sweeps us along with them into that reality. Think of any artists you like, their art has a sense of having been completely worked through at high intensity, and it gives off the power that commitment gave it. (I think of Joseph Cornell and Richard Serra, two different birds if there ever were different birds). Even their sketches and notes will have it. Picasso's notebooks positively vibrate.

The Change

So an artist, a good artist focussing on doing good work, catches us up and brings us along with him, he takes us to an new place, a new idea and shows us with his art something that we never knew was there. What we know is enlarged by this excursion, a little or a lot. Big art, big change. Big bang.

But this change, which lies at the heart of the experience of art, absolutely has to take place first in the artist before it can happen for the audience. Perhaps the very function of art, for the artist at least, is the change and enlargement of consciousness. There is a story that when Mondrian was painting over some old canvases he had lying around, a friend reproached him for covering up perfectly good paintings. "I'm not trying to make paintings," he said, "I'm trying to find things out."

This thought about art-as-change-of-mind seems to get close to a baseline definition of good art, and it was confirmed for me instinctively time after time in artworks I experienced. And I was increasingly curious about the mechanism of this change. Then I found some confirmation in science when I came across the work of Antonio Damaso, a neurologist who is engaged in the mapping of the brain activity using scans that show how the brain responds when it is stimulated in various ways. Damasio has written an extraordinary book, called The Feeling of What Happens, that attempts to locate the phenomenon of consciousness. In it he says that "we become conscious when the organism's representation devices exhibit a specific kind of wordless knowledge—the knowledge that the organism's own state has been changed by an object."

There it was. Though Damaso wasn't talking about art but about consciousness and the brain, his work seems to describe the mechanism of art as it exercises its effect. I take

him to mean that the response generated by a stimulus (a painting or sculpture, or an organization of sounds, as in music, or words, or an idea or installation) does not dissipate when the encounter is over, that the neural structure of the brain does not simply drop back into to its pre-stimulated shape. When the brain is stretched to encompass a new stimulus, it stays stretched, as does our consciousness. (I can't help but visualize that change as areas of brain turning yellow and green like they do in the color illustrations of the scans.)

Mondrian knew that this stretch—call it a state of heightened awareness—is the real point of making art. As the great painter and teacher Robert Henri said, "The object, which is back of every true work of art, is the attainment of a state of being, a state of high functioning, a more than ordinary moment of existence. In such moments activity is inevitable and whether this activity is with brush, pen, chisel, or tongue, its result is but a byproduct of the state, a trace, the footprint of the state." My own feeling is that the artwork, what he calls the "byproduct," carries within it a kind of seed of this heightened state and passes it along to viewers so they too get that state or some version of it.

This all suggests that the reason some people are drawn to doing art work is not to make art objects: it is simply the way that these people stretch, learn, grow, become. The doing changes them.

Now, Damasio is not talking specifically about art, and there's no good/bad qualifier on the object perceived or on the nature of the shift. He doesn't require that the organism (us) see something interesting and the change doesn't have to be "good". In developmental terms, think of the simple act of an infant pulling over a table and thus learning something. (Buckminster Fuller called these childhood disasters "engineering experiments.") In even more basic terms, the act of seeing can set a capability in motion, bring it alive as a tool of investigation and consciousness. A neuro-biologist friend told me that a kitten kept in the dark during a specific week or two in it's development would never develop the ability to process visual information. The eyes would be mechanically sound, but the kitten would be blind.

Take that thought further and imagine a more developed organism (you) encountering something everyday, say a car. Nothing new there, no change. But if you encounter an artwork the likes of which you have never seen, your mind has to shift and change to encompass it. When I first saw Mark Rothko's work I had a kind of luminous experience. There was no subject and no idea that I could articulate, but there was this great presence. I looked and looked, and then I saw the work, just saw it, and had the wonderful experience of stimulation and enlargement . Rothko's work had changed my mind. And the change let me look at that painting, his other paintings, as well as the color of light in air, differently. My reward was the change, the enlargement itself.

The Place of Analysis

Can we get an understanding of the mystery of good art through criticism? Surely it will move us toward an understanding of some things about art, but thinking critically to probe the work uses a different part of the brain than the work's creator used. Thus

critical thinking can describe things about the artistic experience, but it's not the same thing as having the experience, and it doesn't provoke the experience. (Note that Damasio referred to "wordless knowledge.") And art is, I think, first about having the experience of the piece.

So analysis offers us a useful tool, but it is not, I think, a primary tool.
When I do the first critique in a workshop, people look at the photos pinned up on the walls and start at once trying to fit them into the matrix of photography, look for ways they relate to what they've seen in some book or gallery. They look for what they know, which is the wrong place to look for the new work we're trying to do in the class. So I direct the class to a prime question that gets to the heart of the work, and that question is, "Is the work alive?" To enliven us it must have it's own vitality within it. It can use and affirm what we know and draw foundation from it, but it can't depend on it. Good work changes the mind, a little or a lot. If it is "good", if it is alive, it means that the photographer had to get into a state of aware aliveness, had to see what the casual viewer, the non-artist, would probably not have. Knowledge and critical thinking can serve to make the vision clear, but they don't substitute for the living experience.

It is from this state of aliveness that good work is churned. The "good" component of such work cannot be planned and executed. (I heard a composer call such attempts "the fallacy of intention.") Work arises from the doing, and it stands a chance of being good when you dive into the circumstances and let it occur. You slide paint around, or string words like beads, then restring them. If you are fortunate, something starts to happen, you see a shape, a glow, a story that calls you on. It reveals itself as you work further, and you then craft what is revealed. The work may start with a plan or outline, but if it is going to really take off, it quickly enlarges beyond the plan. You can choose direction, structure, materials, etc., but you just can't plan "good."

The poet James Wright described it as, "(writing) to find out what it is I have to say." It's still the most succinct description of the process I know.

(An aside to all of us who work in the commercial process: you will have noticed that the search for a transformative aliveness is mostly excised from the creative work we do for a living. Art-with-a-purpose is a work negotiated from a set of givens. That's not at all wrong for commercial work, but it is n ot art.

Art that is Ugly
If art is good, must we like it?

My god, of course not. Good work can be unfamiliar and disturbing. Finding something good is not about hanging it on the wall, it's about that change. And while art may provoke a response, it won't necessarily be a pleasurable one. In fact, for all that art generates emotion, making art doesn't usually begin with it, and it's probably best that way. Emotion arises from our interaction with the art. Reviewing the recent Walker Evans retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Anthony Lane talked about what he calls the "ruthlessness" of the artist. "It should not be confused with

meanness; it entails no more than looking with a clear eye, unclouded by the trace of a tear, and rebuffing all blandishments—the need to please, say, or the cry for change—as you struggle to set down your observations. The beauty is in the beholding, not in the beheld." Though one may have emotion when faced with Evans' photography, no one would ever call him an emotional artist.

(Shall we take an interesting little side excursion into the realm of Eastern thought? This business of setting aside intention seems quit alien to most of us, so much so that it takes a lot of words to explain it. But Taoism covers it with a simple phrase, wu wei. It is usually translated as non-doing, but that suggests passiveness and stasis. What it really means is allowing action to go forward naturally as it is going without controlling it. Water flowing down hill offers a good example of wu wei. The recently-reversed work of the Army Corps of Engineers in the Everglades, in which they dammed the slow flow that was literally the arterial circulation of the swamp, would be an example of it's opposite.

The suggestion is that wu wei is a natural state of awareness and expansion and integration that we lose sight of. There is a Tibetan meditation practice called Dzogchen that is done to recover it. It's aim is not a suspension of mental activity, but a state of alive awareness of that activity and of everything else that is taking place. I once asked a Dzogchen master if making artwork wasn't just a matter of spinning out more illusory existence, and he replied that, to the contrary, the state in which art is made is one of singular awareness and one-pointedness, not one of cogitation and interpretation, and this was well worth practicing, a meditation in itself.)

So let's sum up this whole part of the discussion by saying that a piece of artwork that has changed the artist can change the viewer. Comfort is not the measure. Good work can irritate us and still change us. Often I find myself coming to like, or at least appreciate, work that I didn't at first. So now, when I don't really like something, I wait to see how things ripen in me. After all, I don't want to be in the position of some French critic who wrote, "Does Monsieur Monet really think his smears of paint are worthy of the Temple of the Goddess of Art?"

Suspending Judgement
How can the artist get out beyond what he knows, his likes and dislikes?
The above-mentioned James Wright spoke about tossing out possibilities and then keeping them in the air and not grasping at any of them too soon. He suggests that if one can keep the possibilities afloat, one allows connections to develop that are new and unexpected and that make immediate and perfect sense. The newness and the sense combine to provoke that moment of insight when we wake up out beyond ourselves, where we can see things in a new way, where our mind changes. Art functions rather like a like a Zen koan.

An example from writing: the writer Annie Proulx writes of a flock of wild

ducks taking off "like a deck of cards flung into the air." The satisfaction, the release, comes exactly from the aptness of this image which is both unexpected AND makes perfect sense. It wakes us.

(The same principle is the basis of humor. A woman walks into a bar with a duck under her arm. And a man comes up to her and says, "Where d'ja get the pig?"
And she says, "That's not a pig, it's a duck."
And he says, "I was talking to the duck!"
Exact same thing. It gives us one expectation, then hits us with something else that we didn't see coming, but which also makes a perfect—and loony—sense. The more unexpected and the more right, the funnier.)

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So art gets beyond its contents, and its quality can't be summarized in its constituent parts. It may use words or pictures, or objects or sounds, or
light, it may represent certain things, but they are there only to start a process. The content conjures the effect from somewhere quite beyond itself. Thus it lets us experience things that we just can't get at any other way, and that experience is what's real. It's the way art works.

Actually, mediocre art does tend to reside in its information, and it usually tells us stuff we already know. And that really comforts a lot of people, while new, living art frightens and offends a lot of people at the same time that it astounds and awakens some others.

Hey, What's Wrong with Advertising?
In this kind of discourse there's usually someone who comes along and defends good advertising, pointing out that the purpose of advertising is to move goods, and that advertising that achieves that is good and should be recognized as good. If we confine ourselves to the loop of advertising, they are right. But if we take this very same standard into the larger cultural arena, we wind up at the notion that sales is the measure of what is good. And that's not so. Have you looked at your television lately?

To give it it's due, advertising is a genre, and as such doesn't ever intend to rise above itself. Good advertising is good advertising, just as good soft rock is good soft rock…good in terms of the genre, and people accept it as such. But really good work transcends limits and takes its maker and its audience somewhere out beyond where they thought they might be heading. Occasionally a commercial project gets toward that in some of its particulars, but that is so, so rare.

Art slash Work
Well, getting back to daily reality, what is the point of all this in our working world? What does it have to do with getting today's job out the door?

Well, not all that much…at least not with work. But it has a lot to do with our lives. Most of us started fooling with photography or sketching or designing things, or writing BECAUSE DOING IT TAUGHT US THINGS. Like Mondrian, we weren't trying to

make good art, we were trying to find things out. And when we did, these were our first good photographs or paintings, and probably the first alive things we had ever done. And our response to them was to want to do more and to make them better still. We were hooked and gone.

Now, it's unlikely anyone reading this is a Mondrian or Mark Rothko or Robert DeNiro. But we are who we are, and if we're at all creative our mechanisms are set up the same way as theirs are, and we want—and even need—to do work that is good…ugly or messy or beautiful, but really good.

If really good work enlivens and stretches and changes the mind, if it touches everything in us, then that's all the reason we need to seek it out and think about it and try to make it ourselves.

Words Fail Me, as They Must
Well, after all that talk are we any closer to knowing what good work is?

As you can see, I've convinced myself that I know some of the things that constitute it and lead to making it, something of the way we function when we make it, and some of the ways it works on whomever sees it. But when I pull the pieces apart there's always that last tantalizing bit that I can't get at, even though I know it's the most important part. For a while I thought I simply wasn't intelligent enough, not analytical and verbal enough. Lately though I've concluded that the last bit lies beyond where this kind of analysis even operates. The best I seem to be able to do is stand at the edge of the intellect and point excitedly into consciousness, and anyone who wants to grasp what is there simply has to go and see for himself.

A few years ago I saw a photograph accompanying a review of a retrospective by Roy de Carava at the Museum of Modern Art. It was one of the best things I'd ever seen, and it struck me deeply. There seemed to be nothing in it that accounted for its power. Let me describe it to you. It is of an empty hallway. We see the dark gray planes of the walls, a ceramic tiled floor, and a halation of light from a light bulb hanging just out of frame. And that's it.

But there's so much going on in the image. I went to the museum and saw the print, and afterward I went and got the book and turned to that page. And each time I looked at it I had the same undiminished response to it's power and perfection and to the enigma of how it achieved them. I've showed it to others who are not photographers and they've had the same response. I tried to write about it, but I wound up writing a poem to the picture. That was as close as I could get to expressing myself. In the end I looked at the harmonies and rhythms and tensions of the picture and decided that it must work somewhat the way music does. And I have no idea how music works.

So when I think about what good is, I get part of the way there, but the last part of the answer doesn't come and I'm reduced to silence. But here's the important thing: it's not

an empty silence, it's a kind of charged state, very awake, very intense, full of new possibilities.

And that state is the result of experiencing a work. What gives rise to that state can't be extracted and taken away from it, because it is entwined in the work itself. One can only take away an awareness of what the work has done to one. But to get the state one has to go—travel, really—into the work itself, like a pilgrim, because the good of the work is consciousness itself, embodied and then imparted.

That's what good is.

- Sean Kernan