

Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder?

INTRODUCTION

Explain to students that this session considers the idea that Art has become, for some people, the new 'religion of life'.

ACTIVITY

Show students this quote from *The Guardian's* Art & Design blog [<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/artblog/2007/may/30/howartreplacedreligion> - Posted by Francesca Gavin on 30 May 2007]:

Explain that, for Francesca Gavin, 'art has replaced religion'. For her, visiting a major gallery is like stepping into a 21st century cathedral'. Modern artists, like Damian Hirst, are like 'gods'. Even keeping up with art is an act of devotion, with elements of ritualistic pilgrimage in finding and visiting a new exhibition or installation.

By way of contrast, show students this article by Daisy Watt, 'Grayson Perry: Most modern art is rubbish' in *The Independent* [<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/grayson-perry-most-modern-art-is-rubbish-8829723.html> - posted on 20/9/2014]:

Explain that, for British Turner prize-winning artist, Grayson Perry, a lot of modern art is "rubbish". According to Perry, "Although we live in an era where anything can be art, not everything is art."

Ask the students to consider these views and to respond to such questions as:

- *Do you agree that a lot of modern art is 'rubbish'? How would you justify your view?*
- *Can anything be art?*
- *Does art have to have an element of 'beauty' about it? Why / why not?*
- *Is it better to be an appreciator of art than to follow a religion? Why / why not?*
- *What might be missing if there was only 'art', and no 'religion'?*

Get some feedback on students' views, then tell them something about Mark Rothko, e.g. that he was a Russian Jew who emigrated to the USA in 1913, that he began painting landscapes, portraits and still-lives and turned increasingly to abstract and expressionist works, and that he became most interested in the potential of form

and colour to affect the human mind. Rothko said, 'The fact that people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when painting them. And if you say you are moved only by their colour relationships then you miss the point. I am interested in expressing the big emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom.' He was also interested in mythology. He once said, 'Without monsters and gods, art cannot enact a drama'.

[See the Wikipedia article on Rothko for references:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Rothko.]

ACTIVITY

Show students an example of Rothko's 'multiform' paintings such as 'Four Darks in Red', found, e.g., at:

<https://whitney.org/collection/works/897> and ask them to study and reflect on it.

After some time, get some initial impressions and encourage an exchange of views and ideas, especially on the idea of communicating 'big emotions' and 'religious experience'. In particular bring out some of their thinking on such ideas as:

- *Is 'Four Darks in Red' art?*
- *Is it 'beautiful' in any way?*
- *Imagine that the painting contains a 'political' message – what do you think that message might be?*
- *Whose role is more important, the artist or the viewer?*
- *If an abstract painting doesn't have any effect on you, are you more likely to say: (a) It's rubbish; (b) It's really amazing; (c) I don't see anything here; (d) something else.*

ACTIVITY

Show the *Amor Sciendi* YouTube film 'All Art is Political, Even Rothko': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iukZXTS42cY>. Ask students to say whether they think their opinion of the painting has been enhanced by hearing this account.

CONCLUSION

How will students respond when they next see examples of abstract or religious art? Do they think that there is more to some art than meets the eye?