Notes on Reading 1: pages 227-234 **Scope of the Arts**

- It is difficult to define "the arts"
    - Seems to be a very inclusive term--embraces the world and people, morality and religious beliefs
    - We found previously it overlapped with mathematics
- Is there a specific set of "content" in the arts?
    - In particular contexts, yes
        - For example there are specific techniques and rules to painting
    - In terms of the arts as a whole, the arts represent, convey, or elicit a multitude of thoughts and issues but not a specific set of ideas
        - This means then that they do pose knowledge questions
        - But the knowledge questions are not of a unique or distinct type—they are the sort we could ask in any area of knowledge
- If there is not a specific definition of the arts or a specific subject matter, can we characterize art by its contribution to our knowledge as a whole
    - They do play a crucial role by contributing to our pleasure, or awareness and understanding of topics, and our enjoyment of beauty

Ways of Knowing in the Arts

- The above is a very ambiguous conception of the arts, and perhaps we would do better by considering the ways of knowing involved in art
    - Again, the arts are hard to pin down because they use all ways of knowing.
    - We want to be aware that reason, often neglected, can be a key component in understanding the arts, so they are not only about emotion and feeling
        - Literature provides an excellent example as we attempt to understand the motivation of an author or the characters that author created
        - We would not learn much about music without investigating its structure
- To complicate matters even further, not only is it difficult to pinpoint a specific content for the arts, nor a particular set of knowledge issues, or even specific ways of knowing—there is also the issue of the artist who created something and the audience who apprehends it.
    - The arts are also characterized by their unique interrelationship of personal and shared knowledge.

Personal and Shared Knowledge

- We can begin by distinguishing between creating art (personal knowledge) and the evaluation of that creation by others (shared knowledge)
- We could identify three different levels of the aesthetic experience

    - The aims of the artist: this would be the view of the artists, and is an example of **personal knowledge**
    - However, there also seem to be a second aspect of this experience, the reaction of a view or reader or audience member--how you react to a work of art (you like it, it moves you)
        - This is not purely personal knowledge because it occurs at the intersection of what the artist presents and what the individual audience member experiences.
        - The text refers to this as the **zone of exchange**
    - But inevitably, the experience does not stop there for a number of reasons
        - People discuss the art work and it passes into shared knowledge
        - This discussion bring with it critical tools that in some sense attempt to evaluate its meaning, its value
        - Here we cross over into the realm of **shared knowledge**
- The complexity and interplay of personal knowledge, zone of exchange, and shared knowledge is highlighted in the interview with Fearghus O'Conchuir in the text. Some key points:
    - In dance the personal and zone of exchange intersect when a choreographer is also a dancer in the performance
        - The personal knowledge aspect is the physical exploration of a topic through movement
        - However the role of the dancer is to take the structure presented by the choreographer and bring it to light, which seems to be both a blending of personal knowledge (that of the individual choreographer and the dancer) but also a zone of exchange (where the dance applies his knowledge to the structure provided by the choreographer)
            - The art work is then transformed in this exchange and is already a sort of shared knowledge/
    - What of the third part of this triad—the idea of shared knowledge in the form of evaluating a dance performance?
        - It would seem that evaluation is applying a different set of perspectives to a performance
        - It can bring out new meanings, but it can also force a performance into a pre-determined pattern and miss its creativity
        - The result of evaluation can be helpful and liberating, or it could simply create a new orthodoxy for judging art.

        - The critic can be helpful or destructive to the creative process, but is potentially a valuable new voice or perspective

Observations:

- When people claim that "art is purely subjective" aren't they really referring to the first two levels above—the personal knowledge of the artist and the zone of exchange and the subsequent reaction to the work of art by an audience?
- But, is that all there is to art? Are we utterly incapable of making non-subjective evaluations about art?
    - If the answer is "yes," then all art is subjective and we are study with the John Wayne theory of art (my description) *If I like it, then it is art.*
    - However, if the answer is "no," then we need to enquire whether and to what extent it is possible to formulate non-subjective rules for evaluating an aesthetic experience.

Notes on Reading : pages 234-240 **Methods in the Arts**

Critical Judgment—opinion or informed opinion?

- There is widespread resistance to critical analysis in the arts, just as in the Oscar Wilde quote: "there are two ways to dislike art—one is to dislike it, and the other is to like it *rationally*
- However, critical does not have to be defined as "tearing something apart to analyze it." Being critical could also mean having specialized knowledge or background knowledge that allows one to understand it better
    - Every other area of knowledge requires this, so why not the arts?
    - It can lead to something positive, a deeper appreciation of works of art (and perhaps an understanding of where they do not work)
- So, perhaps the methods of evaluating the arts can be seen as gaining a fluency that permits a greater understanding of the expression, rather than any sort of objective evaluation. Dombrowski outlines four "methods" that may be used to understand (and perhaps evaluate) art
- Perhaps all of the stuff that interests us in artistic expression could be seen as "informed opinion"
    - From the article last time, we want to argue that there are standards in art because we find something important that we think others should share and care about
    - In order to learn what that is, we must dig a bit deeper and get background information and also learn what informed people in the field think (their views may not be justifiable in the objective sense)

Methods: Knowledge Questions

- What sorts of things might we be interested in when examining the arts? One response is the things they have in common
    - To what degree do they work the same way?
    - How bound to a historical or cultural context is a work of art, and how much can we safely generalize from such instances?

- When art is non-representational (lacks a context) how do we generalize from a specific case?
- Is there progress in the arts? Do they build on the past?
- Do works of art make knowledge claims?
- ***According to what criteria do we evaluate arts? How is this affected by critical perspectives, drawn from knowledge in the field?***

- Methods: Diversity and subjectivity
  - No other area shows such diversity and inclusiveness in terms of:
    - Subject matter
    - Variety of forms
    - Engagement in all ways of knowing
    - Its ability to play multiple roles in our lives
  - In addition to diversity, there is the abundance of different perspectives
    - Works of art (and our appreciation of them) are infused with the perspectives that we bring to the experience
    - An interesting feature of these perspectives is that none of them proves the other false. This means that we don't juxtapose one school of art to another to determine which one is "right."
    - One way to sort out all of this diversity is to admit once we look at particular examples of the arts, our general knowledge issues give way to social and historical contexts
      - It would seem we cannot understand or evaluate a given work of art without grasping its context
    - To recap:
      - We can examine knowledge issues to see what they all have in common, but it seems that does not tell us all that much about a given work of art
        - In that sense knowledge issues can only take us so far in understanding the meaning in artistic expression
        - Perhaps this is because such an approach is in fact too objective and therefore less appropriate?
      - So, when we try to learn more background information or we want to make a critical evaluation, it may be of a different type. It may be *subjective*.
      - Let us redefine subjective—it does not mean purely arbitrary or simply a matter of preference, but rather we use background and informed opinion

- This is not unknown in other areas of knowledge—it is the *Verstehen* position discussed in the social sciences.
- We rely on informed opinion and background information to understand the experience as it is lived, not to evaluate or test empirically

Methods in the Arts: Common Characteristics

- Here is how knowledge issues fit into the arts: they help us determine the purely subjective from the subjective that is worth studying, the "real" art
- What are the features of genuine art?
  - Creates something accessible to the senses
  - Deliberately shape human experience with the materials the medium uses through aesthetic choices
  - The arts communicate something to their audience—a purpose set within a perspective
- Finally, the arts use all three aspects of human subjectivity: imagination, creativity, aesthetic judgments, and our capacity to communicate

Methods in the Arts: the General and the Particular

- One way of better understanding this notion of subjectivity is by comparing the arts to a more sequential discipline, such as science
  - They are similar in that the work of individuals inspire new ways of thinking about the world, new ways of seeing things
  - However, how they do this is different
    - In science, individual work fuses into shared knowledge and becomes universal
      - The work of individuals is blended with others to present a new objective view of experience
      - Other can accept, disprove or modify it, but they are dealing with an impersonal and objective body of knowledge
    - In the arts, the individual work does not lose its particularity.
      - Pieces of art never converge to a common goal which gets by linking them together
      - Objective measures are irrelevant—more accurate is not a term that applies in the arts
      - They do not build upon one another cumulatively
      - New expressions take their place alongside old ones; they do not supercede them
  - This examination of the general and the particular suggests the degree to which we can make generalizations about art.
    - Applying generalization to particular works of art
      - We can look at a genres and deduce tendencies within that genre which serve as more or less accurate generalization
      - We can then apply that general knowledge to individual expression to see if that tells us more about that as a work of art
    - Art generalizing about the human experience

        - It works the other way as well: an artist may generalize about the human experience
    - In both cases, we seem to need informed opinion and background knowledge to determine whether we should accept the claims about a particular work that comes from our generalization, or generalizations that come from a particular work.