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Reading Response 1

The term ‘art’ means different things to different people. Something I, as a person who has studied various disciplines of art, think of as ‘art’ may be regarded as a chicken scratch or child’s play to another. In the same sense, what the Western culture views as art, could be seen as a standard object or a useful tool to a person from another culture. In her article, “The Trouble with (the Term) Art” (2006), Carolyn Dean investigates the issues surrounding the Western practice of deeming cultural artifacts from non-Western civilizations, as art. Dean offers up examples from several different cultures and examines the possibility of a globally acceptable definition of what art is.

In order to evaluate a diverse definition of what art is, Dean first focuses on the origins of the term ‘art’ in Western society. Initially, Dean states that, “what became art was what had been and could still be collected and displayed in the manner to which art had become accustomed” (p. 24). In 18th century Europe, where the word ‘art’ originated, the focus was on monetary value and what was valued in the colonialist lifestyle. If a work of art wasn’t worth anything and couldn’t be traditionally displayed, one could only assume that it wouldn’t receive the title of ‘art’. During that same time frame, tribes of indigenous people throughout the world were continually creating artifacts that are now looked at as art. At that time, those cultures had not yet recognized a term for visual arts and their lack of contact with European civilization would shelter them from the term. This research begs the question; how would our definition of art be different if 18th Century Europeans had not coined the term?
Dean examines several potential downfalls to placing the label of art onto non-Western artifacts. In a compelling argument, Dean speaks of Western civilizations tendency to place value on works of art. We see certain objects as art, therefore they are. By looking at an indigenous artifact such as a *masengo* from the Bwami society (p. 26), and slapping the label of art onto it, the artifact becomes more of a reflection of the values of the viewer. In turn, we run the risk of sending the message that our value system is superior to the system of the culture in question, in this case the Bwami society of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. If we see their carvings and objects as art, what do they see them as? How do they not view their artifacts as art? What is wrong with their society and how they view art? It makes me wonder if the tables were turned, and someone came into my home and told me that the cat castle I had built out of cardboard tubes and fabric strips was to be called art and should be put on display in a museum; how I would react.

With the advancement of modern society, and our ability to access images of cultures from around the world with little to no effort, our opinions of indigenous art have changed. Dean gives examples of rocks in the Incan culture and their connections to iconography. Until recently, rock formations would not have been considered art, but Dean tells of that a rock formation in the shape of a puma in K’enko Granda (p.28) has been deemed art due to it’s abstract qualities and it’s resemblance to a jungle cat. This revelation brings into question our definition of art. Can any natural thing that looks like something else be deemed art? What are we saying about a particular culture if we suddenly decide a recognizable landmark from their culture should be called art? Who are we to decide?
The theme of European supremacy is woven throughout this article and Dean shows her objection to a Western-dominated notion of what art is by offering up alternatives to the term art when referencing non-Western artifacts. Dean suggests we use indigenous terms for artifacts or refer to them as categories or epistemologies. In a culture that doesn’t have a word for art, our connection to the visual qualities of an artifact may be lost in translation if we simply refer to the object as art. Dean speaks of the Mexican term *toltécayotl*, which translates to artistic sensitivity and the Incan word, *quechua*, which can be used to define several art-like entities. While using indigenous terms to refer to artifacts, some details may be lost in translation and Dean herself states that, “it is clear that, for the most part, the solution is not a simple substitution of native words that approximate conventional art-historical terms” (p.32).

References