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First Word Art / Last Word Art

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Art means many things to many people, but I know of one cut that neatly divides the art world in two, and ultimately relates to other worlds such as business. One might call this "first word art" and "last word art." At least that's how I first heard it. As a grad student long ago, I discovered a resourceful and eccentric engineer named Brad squirreled away in MIT's famous Building 20, a funky wood-frame structure left over from World War Two. Building 20 housed the Radiation Lab, the Research Lab for Electronics, Noam Chompsky's first Linguistics Lab, and the MIT Council for the Arts. Brad was the optics and electronics engineer for RLE's Jerry Lettvin, and occupied a space filled to the ceiling with gear in various stages of assembly, and with gerbils. He looked like he was somewhere between 35 and 65 years old, and once told me he never got out of bed before noon. He seemed to enjoy helping over-stimulated wildcard types like me.

One day, in an effort to calm me down, he asked what I thought of the composers Haydn and Beethoven. He said their art was not only different but opposite. Franz Joseph Haydn, he continued, invented the classical symphonic form. People heard it and found it new and novel. Critics had little basis for comparison, or for rating its quality. "First word art," declared Brad. Years later, after the symphony became an accepted format, one of Haydn's students, Ludwig van Beethoven, composed his Ninth Symphony. "A hard act to follow," said Brad. "Last word art."

And there you have it: First word art is groundbreaking and exploratory. It's playing outside any rule structures. It side-steps competition. People often don't know how to react to it. Last word art is virtuosity after the rules have been fixed. It accepts the established form, and is judged by comparison.

Some folks consider first word art as the only true art and believe last word art isn't art at all. Why bother if it's already been done? Doing something better or more beautiful is merely entertainment, not art. SF MOMA Director David Ross likes to say that "artists always need to ask themselves 'what's my job now?'"

Other folks consider last word art as the only true art and believe that first word art isn't art at all. How can anyone do anything well if the medium is still evolving? Don't confuse exploration with expression. Rudolph Arnheim wrote in his 1932 "Film as Art" that when cinema went from silent to sound, the level of art went down since everyone was interested in the novelty more than anything else.

A filmmaker friend once told me that he works in 16mm film for all the opposite reasons that I work in new media. He said he likes his medium because "all that experimentation stuff has already been done and now I can simply use it." It's noteworthy that 16mm film once occupied the niche of the experimentalist until video came along, and video held the niche until the Web.

First word art and last word art may ideologically divide the world in two, but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For several years I asked my students to bring in examples of art in any medium that they believed were *both* first word and last word art. Though such lists are often all over the map, some examples recurred:

The Wizard of Oz. Tommy (the rock opera). Stravinsky's Rites of Spring. The Beatle's Sergeant Pepper. The Pantheon in Rome. Cubism. Pointillism. Anything by John Cage. Frank Lloyd Wright buildings. Kubrick's 2001. Early Martha Graham. Early Disney. Brecht. The geodesic dome. M.C. Escher. Hunter S. Thompson. Abel Gance's 3-screen Napoleon. Debussy's symbolist opera Pelléas et Mélisande. Melville and Hawthorne. The Frisbee.

Then, one of my students asked "doesn't last word art require surviving the test of time?" Everyone was astonished that something so obvious had been overlooked, and no one disagreed.

So perhaps the distinction between first word and last word art is in the priority of the timeframe. An electronic arts festival needs to show what's hot now. A museum collection curator needs to select what's worth saving for future generations to experience.

This distinction may be a healthy one to look at today in the world of high-tech business. We've just come out of a viciously first-word moment, where people cut down the trees for the apples. Now everyone wonders what's next, with a general acknowledgement that seeds need to be planted and nurtured as well as short-term opportunities need to be seized. If life follows art, it may be possible to do both. Then art can move ahead meaning many things to many people.