

Brenda McCullers, ARH 6930, Fall 2014

In the article, "The Trouble with (the Term) Art," author Carolyn Dean (2005) considers "some of the consequences of identifying art in societies where such a concept did or does not exist" (p. 26). She came to the conclusion that there is a risk of re-creating a society in the image of the modern West; there is the risk of rendering the society as being lessor or insufficient, or more primitive than the modern West; and there is a risk of suggesting that cultures that did not possess the concept of art ought to have it, and will benefit from it. Dean proposes, "the discipline of art history all too often has, through many of its European epistemological technologies, reinforced what are in fact colonialist, perspectives, judgments, and rationales" (p. 26).

Dean explains there is a risk of re-creating society in the image of the modern West, from an excerpt in the article, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" by Shelly Errington. In the illustration Errington argues that "art" from outside the European tradition is driven by desire and want. Things not made as art, become art, because they are highly valued. The example she shares is one of African masks that are cleaned, placed on podiums, and referred to as sculptures. Errington refers to these things as "art by appropriation" rather than "art by intention" (Dean, 2005, p. 26).

Dean continues her argument by sharing the story of a well-known archaeologist using the term art to describe an archaeological find. By doing this, Dean explains, the archaeologist "imposes and prioritizes a Western reading" re-creating an artifact into the image of art hoping to increase its value (p. 27). This can

be seen as an effort to “reconstruct other visual cultures in the image of the colonizing West. However, in this case it also renders the culture as being lessor or insufficient.

One of the main examples Dean uses throughout her argument is that of the Incas. She explains how until recently only small Inca figurines were recognized as art. With that said, large rocks like the Funerary Rock from Machu Picchu that were more highly valued by the culture than the small figurines, were not considered art. The reason being, they were not portable, they could not be transported, they could not be part of a selection, or be displayed. Still today, understanding the importance of the Incan rocks to their culture, most attention remains on the small figurines. Other sacred Inca rocks, which Dean explains as made “art by appropriation” are indirectly compared to “art by intention.” Dean (2005) believes this “invites judgment according to Western aesthetic standards by which they can only, invariably, fail to measure up, since they were not made with such standards in mind” (p. 30).

Within the discussion of the Incan culture and their artifacts, Dean references Errington regarding the matter of iconicity. She explains that iconicity is “one of the aspects of things made ‘art by appropriation’ ...and remains an unstated and even repressed criterion for the identification what counts as art” (Dean, 2005, p.28). This is a problem for Dean. She believes this results in people looking for images that were not intended to be images—people looking for art that was not intended to be art.

Dean refers to the fact that the Western aesthetic standards are the instrument to which art is measured. It is the point of reference, the scale used for reference but perhaps it is time to move away from the word “art.” Dean suggests that we “consider the use of indigenous terms, categories, and even epistemologies where they can be recovered” (p. 31).

Dean’s article indicates the definition of the term art needs redefining. Adding to that, there is evidence for re-evaluation and re-construction of the discipline of art history. However, her opinions are strongly based on her work within the Incan culture. At times it seemed as if her concern was not actually for the art community but was to push forth her personal work. In addition, is it necessary to separate and divide? At a point in time where art education is being removed from schools and art educators are working harder than ever to improve and promote their discipline, why work toward division and separation?

Reference:

Dean, C. (2006). The Trouble with (the Term) Art. *Art Journal*, 65(2), 24-32. Retrieved October 23, 2014, from <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>