

Op-Ed / Ashok Sukumaran

Art is not a subset of culture

Or we could put it this way: art happens where culture ends. It is not so difficult to provide evidence for this somewhat strange statement. There are many parallels, for example: ethics happens where the law ends. An ethical challenge for any of us lies not in doing what the law says, but precisely where the law stops, or cannot tell us what to do. There is no law telling us exactly what to do when someone gets hurt, for example, in an accident one is passing by. We struggle with habits, norms, commitments and desires, in our decisions. Ethics is an encounter at the edge of the sea of known and pre-decided morals and values.

Similarly, and hopefully, no one pre-decided or was told by their party chiefs to tweet *#kapilsibalisani* in response to the government's recent arbitrary and dangerous attempt to censor online content. Politics is not a subset of political parties, or government. Political participation exists precisely where government ends, or fails.

You are hopefully getting the tone of this. So, instead of giving more examples and crowding out this small op-ed space, let's assume for a minute that our schematic proposal is true: art is indeed not a subset of culture. Now, this has several interesting consequences:

1. Conforming to culture as we know it: its norms, fashions, languages, or going down to South Bombay every Thursday, is no longer required. Art is not an attempt to "enter" the box called culture. The opposite is true. Art wants to produce effects that we do not yet know... but can somehow sense, or imagine. It is an experimental, seeking practice that even when its looking back into history, does not emerge as a side-effect of larger, up-the-river motions such as cultural policy, art history or gallery speculation. It has its own origins and motivations, and does not take orders from higher-ups or capture-laters. This is also because aesthetics itself does not have a cultural master. It is present in many other branches of the universe, including the way in which ship cargoes stack up, a neighborhood event is organized, or flowers attract certain birds, and also bees.

2. Thus, art is free to enter other systems, and to have broad ambitions. At **CAMP**, our art work results in films, infrastructures for other people's creative activities, leaks, archives, broadcasts, technical and social experimentation, metaphysical pondering, institutional interventions, and more. These are all manifestations of how sense and sensibility arise in the systemic worlds we live in. Artists should aspire to advise schools and plumbers, influence housing policy and privacy laws, and challenge scientists, technocrats and philosophers.

3. Art education is not about telling students how to decode the meaning of a cultural artifact, or understand obscure symbolic languages. It is about how to learn to feel for things, just as one feels a morning tea, or the rhythm of a train, or the pull of a cinema hall, and then other senses beyond these. Without such feelings and their juvenation, or making, no amount of cultural knowledge can make new culture.

4. Most crucially, an art freed from culture can engage on level ground with capitalism's own widespread appropriation of aesthetics and feelings. All those shiny surfaces, tense finishes, commodity fetishes... surely art has something to say to these, and can propose other ways of living. It is hard to imagine doing this entirely from inside a museum or gallery, and so additional expeditions into the world outside would need to be mounted.

In sum: art radiates culture more compellingly and warmly than the other way around. Do not always believe those who say that culture is complex, and you need to talk to me before doing it. More art, less "cultural production"!

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Ashok Sukumaran is an artist. His interests are in technological media in the broadest sense, including electricity, cycle-rickshaws, sea trade as well as electronic media. His work takes the form of public projects, films, and long-term collaborations via **CAMP** (*computer.org*) which he, Shaina Anand and Sanjay Bhangar co-founded in 2007.