Private and Nonprivate Art

I have reached the subject of art indirectly, by way of exploring the concept of public and private. I employed the expression “nonprivate art" somewhat evasively with reference to the cave paintings for want of an adequate categorical description of them. The commonly used, unmodified term “art” is ordinarily reserved to designate creations produced by an individual (or identifiable small group of individuals) for limited display/performance to be experienced by other individuals, not excluding oneself. In the philosophical sense discussed above, all art would correctly be classified as public insofar as it is projected to be experienced by others. Hannah Arendt goes farther to declare culture a phenomenon of the public world. The performance of art, she says, is of a “higher order” than that needed for things that pertain to the private survival use of human creatures. The artifice of culture, i.e., the creation of works of art, is preservative, transforming the life of what it prolongs from private to public. While nothing wholly escapes the corrosion of natural processes, art enters the public realm and thereby evades the absolute evanescence of private temporality. The escape is qualified, however, for to be fulfilled, art must re-enter die cycle of private experience. Thus, even private art has a public dimension and public art a private one. I will return to this liminality, which I take to be a critical feature of all art. Here I mention it to introduce my use of the adjectives “private” and “nonprivate” to distinguish among species of the generic concept—art. I take nonprivate art to be the ancestral, uncatalogued form of human production, while private art is a newly minted variety of aesthetic expression mat enters history with the advent of self-conscious self-alienation.

“Private art” is thus a retronym, a word invented after the fact of a newly contrived distinction. By analogy, the verb "to parent” is a retronym devised to identify a neutralized function that traditional practice and linguistic usage did not require (although people of both sexes have been parents and carried out the relevant activities for centuries). In retrospect, nonprivate art is likewise a very old phenomenon, repeatedly reincarnated and revitalized. There can be little doubt that it preceded private art historically, and it is therefore puzzling that it is the older art form, rather than the more recent cultural phenomenon, to which the qualifying marker—“public” —was assigned.“

Unmarked terms generally imply greater respectability, and so it is that (private) art (normally left unmarked) has captured the higher ground and serves as the definitive referent. Private art is sometimes called "museum art," even though much of it preceded the exiztence of museums and most of it will never be found in one. Nonetheless, private art, associated with individual artistry, has come to be the standard against which all art is measured.

Art history and aesthetics are no longer invincibly wedded to the idealistic doctrine that (private) art stands radically apart from social history, but that connection is affirmed only cautiously with the admission that artist are not immune from the temper of their times. The greatest art is still celebrated as transcendent and valid universally. In practice, however, (private) art has drawn ever closer to the condition of public art, declaring its social affinity and repudiating the isolation of both artist and artwork.

Critics and historians now situate art within a substantive social history and environment. Nonetheless, the popular ideal persists that art is produced by a solitary individual (possibly with a few collaborators) and results from purely aesthetic inspiration. Exhibitions of art in museums are becoming more contextualized, but the institution’s typical taxonomic segregation and internal departmental organization are a structural constraint that interferes with the scope of exhibition potential.

The presentation of private art in art museums, for example, tends to discourage questions about its material sources. We know that most religious works once adorned holy places and were part of their public ritual. We know far less about their production and how they came to be privatized in the museum. How much of the “high art” of the Renaissance was commissioned for ducal and pontifical palaces not only for private enjoyment but to publicly impress visiting subjects and ambassadors with the authority and power of their owner? Cooling one's heels as one awaited an audience ir1 the vestibule, one might ponder these worldly concerns, but one’s compliments to the great lord would be confined to his exquisite taste and the sublime qualities of the work. Neither etiquette nor good sense would countenance drawing attention to ulterior political motives and pressures. Considering the "pure" aesthetic product, one is easily seduced by formal and representational properties. Yet there usually were explicit practical instructions to impart a message sustained by a normative iconology. Fuller disclosure of

the art's function would qualify the romance that insulates fine art from its worldly sources and keeps it private.

Somehow the grubby politicking and money-raising that tend to accompany the production and installation of openly public art reduce its mystery and diminish its aura. The aesthetic dimension that sanctifies private art is pushed to the background by the social and other short-term factors involved in creating and protecting public art. Although they are not irrelevant to its judgment, the features that attract critical attention to private art receive comparatively little notice in discussions of public art. Beauty and ugliness, while not ignored, are secondary to what the work signifies, where it is sited, and who pays for it. Tellingly too, the creators of public artworks are frequently left unidentified unless they happen also to be well-known artists of the private sort.“ In contrast to private portraiture, where the sitter may be of little interest to subsequent viewers while the name of the artist is featured, public art is more likely to be remembered for what or whom it commemorates or for its local significance than for its creator(s). Few people today know much about La Gioconda, the subject known as Mona Lisa, but most Americans know the four men whose faces adorn Mount Rushmore. On the other hand, Leonardo Da Vinci’s name is universally known as the painter of Mona Lisa, and almost no one can identify the sculptor Gutzon Borglum, who carved Mount Rushmore’s Shrine of Democracy.