John Berger's Views On Perception Of Art And Artist's Perspective

“The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled”. This quotation from the beginning of John Berger’s book Ways of Seeing describes the failed relationship between viewing and understanding, particularly in reference to creative works. In his book, John Berger explores the connection between perception of and interpretation of art through his discussion of creativity and perspective. He describes creativity as a method for a better understanding. He warns, however, that outside factors often jade the public’s perception and understanding of creative products, which in turn impact individual perception. Through his analysis of creativity and creative works, Berger illustrates that it is crucial to recognize outside persuasions in order to truly see and understand pieces of art, and, therefore, discover a better self-understanding.

The creative process exists to make better sense of the indescribable in the world. Berger describes many common things in life as generally known, but never truly understood. He believes that people may see things and understand what they view, but “the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight”. Understanding of the visible and the parts that make the seeing possible are simply disconnected. The main goal of creativity is to try to form this connection through the use of images. Berger states that “images were first made to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent” so that “we could begin to define our experiences more precisely in areas where words are inadequate”. The main target of art pieces is to form an explanation for elusive subjects. Because it can help clarify some aspects of life and living that are otherwise indescribable, the creative process is something in which all people should participate. It is important for individuals to join in the process by taking on the role of artist and creating. This act aids in the formation of different, often deeper, types of seeing. Stepping into the role of artist, however, also involves new responsibilities to the audience.

It is crucial for artists to push the boundaries in their own work and to make sense of the present in order to facilitate a deeper seeing from present and future spectators. Artists are meant to guide the future audience into a better understanding of moments from the past. This is imperative, as “when we are prevented from seeing [art of the past], we are being deprived of the history which belongs to us”. Images provide a new perspective of the past that may be absent in historical texts and documents. They provide more context and a new way of seeing the past, while aiding in the formation of a more whole perspective. A better comprehension of the past helps solidify a better understanding of the present in allowing people to find the relations between the two. The artist’s creations, however, will always contain parts of the artist’s own personal vision, as, “the photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter’s way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper”. This stems from the fact that the artist has an individual perspective, and outside forces and traditions serve some role in shaping that perspective. For an artist to create from his own vision, “single-handed he [has] to contest the norms of the art that [has] formed him”. The artist, particularly in the time of European oil painting, had to actively separate his creations from his influences. No matter the product, however, the artist’s perspective will always exist within the artwork. This is why, when examining art, it is important to recognize this perspective in the work and determine how it affects the perceived message of the piece as a whole. In doing this,

the viewer can build their own perception and understanding of the artwork, ultimately elevating their individual level of seeing.

Just as it is important to recognize how the artist's perspective shapes the artwork, it is also important to see how the surroundings of the work and societal expectations transform the interpretation of an image. The physical context of an image can greatly affect the meaning of the work, which Berger exemplifies through a painting of birds over a cornfield. He supplies this image on one page and then displays the same image on the next with the text, "This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself". The view of the image with no added information is calmer than the same image with the text. The addition of the text makes the image seem more sinister and dark. The incorporation of the information changes the interpretation of the image, though nothing within the image itself has changed. Berger responds to this, saying, "It is hard to define exactly how the words have changed the image but undoubtedly they have. The image now illustrates the sentence". Just as textual information can change the context of a work and transform the meaning, societal pressures can have a similar effect. These societal pressures stem from the need to feel superior to others, mainly in terms of wealth and status. An example of this is in European oil painting, as "oil paintings were themselves simple demonstrations of what gold or money could buy. Merchandise became the actual subject-matter of works of art". Artists in the past created pieces of art to display their customer's wealth in both the content of the painting and the physical painting itself. In today's context, Berger describes art as "a sign of affluence; it belongs to the good life; it is part of the furnishing which the world gives to the rich and beautiful". Much art is held in high esteem simply because society itself determined it is a valuable piece. Society places value on artwork because ownership of said pieces gives the impression of wealth. This makes many pieces less accessible to all to interpret and experience. It is often believed to be something only meant for people of a certain class. People in high societal standings tend to make art exclusive to feel as though they themselves have a higher worth. In turn, interpretations of many art pieces transform. One example of this is The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist, which Berger says, "has become impressive, mysterious, because of its market value". The entire meaning of the piece stems from its monetary value. The piece is held in higher regard than other works of art simply because society gave it value. This is dangerous, as an individual viewing the piece may try to conform their own personal view of the work to match the view that the rest of the world has about the piece. As Sgourev, Stoyan, and Althuizen stated, "markets create rather than simply reflect individual preferences". It may lead the viewer to form a perspective that is not truly what they see or interpret.

The combination of societal pressure and the contextual perspective impact the individual viewer's perception. As Berger states, "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe". Whether a person is cognizant of the impacts, outside pressures and contexts influence every person's individual perspective and view of the world. Even daily, changing emotions can transform someone's outlook, which, when viewing art, can affect the interpretation of the work. Berger explains that "we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves". The outside factors will always be present and always impact an outlook, but it is crucial to be able to recognize how these elements affect a view so that it is possible to set them aside and form a truly individualized opinion and understanding of art.

In his expression of ideas about creativity, the role of an artist, and the individual's perception of works, Berger makes known the importance of understanding all the components that

combine to form an opinion about an art piece, so that one can form his own genuine, unique view of the work. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing every context that affects the overall meaning of the art in its exact form. It is crucial to look beyond the general public's understanding of an image to form an individual understanding. Berger encourages people to question why others view images in a certain manner, and to look beyond the general opinion. Often, society can unintentionally alter the impactfulness of an image. Rather, Berger hopes that people can begin to look beyond, to personally find meaning in works, which Kapur reiterates in saying that Berger worked in "guiding the viewer into ways of seeing; taking the citizen by the hand and stepping into an open labyrinth, decoding an enigma so as to be able to speak about art and/in/for society". To aid his argument and set the reader on the path of deeper seeing, Berger weaves artistic images and specific examples between his textual argument. He incorporates images in the chapters that are primarily written components to immediately illustrate his argument, overall making it even more impactful. Had he chosen to simply use words to form his argument, it would not be nearly as persuasive or memorable. By precisely exemplifying what he is referencing within his book, Berger immediately impacts the reader's seeing. He forces the reader to view and actively participate in the argument. He allows the reader to immediately put into practice the advice he gives, and allows the reader to form opinions as they read the argument.

Through his analysis of creativity itself, the impact societal pressures and money have on the value placed on art, and the importance of forming personal opinions about images, Berger illustrates that it is crucial to recognize outside persuasions in order to truly see and understand pieces of art. He hopes to make the reader more cognizant of the persuasions that affect how people view pieces, and the significant impact setting aside outside persuasions has on individual interpretation of art. And, by including specific examples and pieces of art within the book, he encourages the reader to actually put into practice the ideas he mentions in hopes that, at the conclusion of reading, this will continue in the reader's consumption of all future works of art.