I’ve come the conclusion that there is considerable confusion these days in the arts community about the nature of creativity. It is currently a fad to equate creativity with abandon — that is to say, a purposeful abnormality. A great deal of art is now messy, disordered, chaotic, and distasteful. An artist throws a bucket of paint off the roof, splashes it onto a canvas a couple of stories below, creates a giant mess and it is called “creative.” Combine this with another common popular myth — that true creativity is somehow anti-establishment — and people start confusing creativity with chaotic anarchy.

The confusion between bizarreness and creativity becomes clouded because it is so easy to compile a list of unconventional people who have been great artists — Lenny Bruce, Jimi Hendrix, Jackson Pollock, and Van Gogh, to name just a few. It is seductive to conclude that what makes these people creative is their abnormality, schizophrenia, substance abuse, or anti-social behavior. Although creativity and abnormality may often go together, there is no cause and effect relationship between them. Because one is weird does not mean they are creative, either in personality or in the artwork created. Worse yet, implied in this erroneous strategy of expression is its corollary — that normalcy, manners, tact, sensitivity, and humility are somehow not creative. Translation: if it can be understood, it must not be creative.

The truth that flies in the face of this thinking is that creative vision is almost never a mess. Instead, it is a clarification of what could not be seen so easily without it. Michelangelo was creative because he saw, and then painted, what others could not. Using the same logic, Jimi Hendrix was also creative because he heard, and then performed, music that others could not. It was not his anti-social behavior that made him a creative individual. It was his talent and vision to see a new and
different (albeit complicated) non-mess that demands our admiration, not his antics. Both of these artists distilled and clarified their vision so we could see it, too. I suppose the difficulty is in distinguishing between mere mess and genius mess.

Picasso was *avant garde* but he did not create mess. He created an order that might have *appeared* like a mess to those who were as yet uninitiated into his view of the world. That is to say, the art of a genius may *look* simple — or perhaps I should say like the art of a beginner — but it is not. A first grader’s first attempt at a clay ash tray and a Japanese master’s tea cup can both be called *simple* but they are not the same. The simplicity of genius and the simplicity of the novice are related but not interchangeable.

I am tired of seeing crayon stick figures drawn by school age children splayed in airport lobbies as *art*. Sure, children are virtuous because of their innocence. This does not make their *artwork* virtuous. When is someone going to stand up and say, bluntly, that this is *bad art* which is not worthy of public display? A child’s art certainly belongs on the refrigerator as an encouragement to develop their skills, but to thrust it on the public is to insult them and to falsely delude the budding artist that *hard work* and *time* are not necessary components to *accomplishment*. Every time I see such displays I can’t help but think of the mature artists who are struggling to find an audience (or make a living) who do not “qualify” for such exposure because they are adults or, God forbid, asking for money directly rather than through the sham of some non-profit organization or politically correct agenda. A child, who is subsidized in their artwork by a parent, does not need the subsidy of the exhibitor. The working and mature artist of accomplishment *relies* on it. Shouldn’t we *reward* accomplishment rather than *potential*?

I was long ago thoroughly and convincingly hoodwinked by a false guru. His art was weird, trite, amateurish and thoroughly inconsequential. Nonetheless, he convinced me with the power of his authority and my timidity that his intelligence and artwork were so subtle, so deeply mysterious, so significantly esoteric that my failure to understand him or his artwork was only a manifestation of my own limitations. With what criteria does the initiate judge the master? True genius, he persuaded, would instantly recognize him for the mystic he claimed he was. To a naïve and insecure eighteen year old, it was a convincing argument. I now
cringe when I hear such piffle offered up as a defense for inferior artwork.

Inferior artwork? There is a popular movement against such value judgements. It proposes that value judgments are meaningless in the world of art. Nonsense! That the world of art should be without standards of quality is ridiculous. The idea that obtuse and obscure artwork is better is merely an excuse. I am also tired of exhibits that offer ill-conceived, badly executed, shallow and meaningless drivel as deep and profound artistic insights.

Do not, however, mistake my sentiment — I am not against the new. I am against the banal masquerading under the guise of the esoteric. Far too often there is an “in joke” quality in the piffle I see that is supposed to intimidate me into submission of my opinions lest I embarrass myself by confessing my naiveté. Hogwash! Certainly my opinions are not sacrosanct, but neither are those of the artist whose work is venerated as an emperor without clothes. Honest debate might be called for, education certainly, but not a pacifist response to blatant hoodwinking!

We are so easily hoodwinked because we seem to have forgotten that genius and discipline are the inseparable yin and yang of great art. Because the bizarre and the abnormal are so easily achieved, it becomes very seductive for some to produce a mere mess and promote it as genius, especially to the general, “less educated” public who will buy it, philosophically and commercially. Such pretense is based on blind faith in an unethical authority. Nowhere is the confusion about this more evident than so many of today’s MFA programs. We judge the work not on its innate ability to communicate and inspire with clarity, but on the value of the MFA itself. When was the last time you read an artist’s statement that clarified anything?

All of this becomes so muddled because we cannot seem to bring ourselves to pass judgments anymore. All art is virtuous when seen from a certain point of view. How absurd. Using this logic, the actions of a mass murderer are virtuous when considered from the point of view of an insect because they so effectively use their opposable thumb! The stick figure of a child or the mess of an incompetent adult artist are virtuous only when seen from the point of view of public who is uneducated or unwilling to say, This is bad art.

Artwork, if it is worth anything, is all about quality — quality in vision, quality in intensity, quality in life. The process of
being an artist is nothing more than the pursuit of quality above all other concerns. An artist who does not strive for excellence is an oxymoron. An artist who substitutes a fake experience for creative insight is a hack, a charlatan, a liar, a phony, a cheat.

Bad art, good art — it’s such a thorny issue. If what I am proposing is true, then an appropriate question might be how can you tell the difference between true creativity and a mere mess? I’m afraid this is an unanswerable question, but it is a knowable experience. That it cannot be accurately defined in words does not make it unreal. Many experiences are knowable without being describable. As Saint Augustine said when asked to give a definition of reality, “I know what it is, but when I try to say what it is, I don’t.” Similarly, I know when a piece of art is piffle and when it is not, even though I may not be able to explain it. I just wish more people would be honest about the drivel and perhaps, if we are fortunate, we could find ourselves surrounded by more artwork that is worthy of our attention.

This, in the final analysis, is what the career of an artist is all about. What separates the immature artist from the master is the developed eye, the developed hand, the trained sense of intuition (as paradoxical as that sounds), the recognition that differentiates a meaningless wudge from a piece of art. Any oaf can take an old typewriter, beat on it with a sledge hammer a couple of times, mount it on a block of walnut and call it Opus 13. They may even fool enough people to have a career, but it would be a dishonest one. I say this because the artist’s product is nothing more than a reflection of an artist’s mind and life. When a mind and a life are shallow, so is the art work. No amount of manipulative shenanigans can cover up for lack of genuine creativity. No amount of purposeful mess can disguise a lack of deeper insight. If we are to clarify the confusion about all the bad artwork we now see, it must begin with an honest appraisal and the courage to speak with conviction when rubbish is exhibited as genius. We must not be so afraid of a difference of opinion that we are willing to sacrifice quality in our values for harmonious banality.