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Why is That Art? A Review Essay

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In *Why Is That Art? Aesthetics And Criticism Of Contemporary Art* Terry Barrett focuses once again on the dynamic relationship between people and works of art. This time, the author of *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding* (2003, McGraw-Hill) and other influential texts takes on a particularly ambitious task.

In the introduction, Barrett informs readers that “after reading the book, [they] should come away with new knowledge of philosophy, art criticism, and contemporary art” (p. xix). Indeed, this 231-page book presents an overview of key Western philosophies of art from the time of Plato to our day. Parallel to this survey of aesthetic theory, Barrett introduces the work of twelve contemporary artists through the writing of various art critics and the artists’ own voices. But the author’s goal goes beyond acquainting readers with the work of aestheticians, critics, and present-day artists: Barrett

also sets out to apply “ancient and contemporary theories [of art] . . . to works of art made recently” (p. xix). The purpose of this application is to give viewers a range of criteria against which to interpret and judge contemporary artworks. In Barrett’s words,

Many students carry misconceptions about judgments of art, too often holding the belief that judgment of art is “all subjective, anyway.” *Why Is That Art?* clearly shows that statements of judgment about works of art need to be based on more than personal preference, that sound judgments need to be accompanied by defensible reasons that are implicitly or explicitly based on criteria. . . . The point of the book is . . . to encourage [readers] to consider many criteria and to choose among them intelligently, critically examine judgments of art made by others, and make informed judgments of their own. (p. xviii)

In addition, Barrett argues that awareness of multiple criteria can help audiences understand “why people hold their views” on art, thus fostering “a more sympathetic understanding of aesthetic and social differences” (p. 211).

Like artworks, written texts can be interrogated from different perspectives. In this essay, I will focus primarily on the conceptual structure of *Why Is That Art?* I will examine how the different ideas in the text relate to and build on each other. In particular, I will devote attention to the connection between the theories of art and the artists’ work as articulated by Barrett. The price paid for choosing this approach is that I will only be permitted to touch briefly on the rich content of the sections dedicated to the ideas of theoreticians and the work of artists. Each of these sections could constitute a book in its own and deserves much more attention than I am able to give it here. I will, however, accept Barrett’s invitation to continue the stimulating conversation initiated in *Why Is That Art?* In this spirit, I will articulate a series of questions that are prompted by the ideas in this book.

Why Is That Art? begins with a two-page preface (including acknowledgements) followed by a one-page introduction. In these two sections Barrett articulates the purpose of the book. He states the rationale, expounds on what is included, and comments on how the text is written. Several ideas from the Preface appear again in the Introduction, creating some confusion and diluting the focus. Still, the information at the opening of the book is essential in orienting readers and establishing what they can expect from the text.

Chapter 1, “Artworlds and definitions: How that became art,” consists of a series of definitions and explanations. The spotlight is on the three areas that anchor the book: art, (philosophical) aesthetics, and art criticism. Each area is presented as a separate entity, in

the style of a reference tome. In a puzzling imbalance, more than half of Chapter 1 is devoted to art criticism--one would expect the realms of art and aesthetics to warrant at least as much attention.

Nevertheless, the conceptual distinctions in Chapter 1 are quite helpful. For example, Barrett sets apart honorific definitions from classificatory definitions of art: Honorific definitions are those that establish the properties a work of art must have to be considered good (according to different standards); classificatory definitions are those that clarify which objects the community accepts as works of art--as opposed to other sorts of objects--irrespective of how good these works are deemed to be. Another useful distinction in Chapter 1, especially for readers with limited experience in art discourse, is that the term "aesthetics" can refer to the philosophy of art or "to one's taste in art or sensibilities" (p. 5) (Barrett uses this term both ways in the text). Yet another welcome clarification Barrett offers is that, contrary to popular belief, most art critics don't regard their positions as absolute. Rather, they see themselves as contributors to an ongoing conversation about art, with all ideas open to revision.

Armed with these and other basic ideas about what art, aesthetics, and criticism can be, the reader moves to the core of the book, formed by chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5. The author devotes each of these four chapters to one of the following perspectives in art theory: Realism, Expressionism and Cognitivism, Formalism, and Postmodern Pluralism. Chapters 2 to 5 are structured in more or less the same way: The first half presents the featured theoretical approach and offers an overview of its key proponents. The second half introduces three contemporary artists whose work, in Barrett's view, is aligned with the theory in question. The author examines each artist by considering the opinion of various critics as well as the artist's own commentary. As he assembles these impressions, Barrett also addresses the relationship between the artist's work and the featured theory. (The structure of Chapter 2 diverges slightly from this paradigm).

The range of theories Barrett presents throughout the central chapters of the book is impressive: Plato (under Realism), Leo Tolstoy and John Dewey (under Expressionism and Cognitivism), Clement Greenberg (under Formalism), and Julia Kristeva and Jean Baudrillard (under Postmodern Pluralism) are just a few of the 45 or so theoreticians whose thinking is represented. Most of these scholars appear in the chapter on Postmodern Pluralism, which in turn includes subsections such as Poststructuralism, Feminism, and Postcolonialism.

Given the large number of thinkers, and considering the total length of the book (231 pages), it would be unfair to expect philosophical depth from this strand of the text. I find it more productive to think of the piece dedicated to theory, first, as an overview of

four key approaches to thinking about art and, second, as a map that locates theoreticians who have written within each tradition. Aside from grouping thinkers together, this map of sorts offers highlights on each scholar's ideas and notes some similarities and differences in their thinking. It remains up to the reader to achieve a more comprehensive vision of each theoretician's position and to explore the tensions that emerge when diverse views about art are juxtaposed.

As counterpart to the various art theories, Barrett introduces a fascinating selection of twelve contemporary artists. The list includes the likes of Jeff Koons, Andres Serrano, Joan Mitchell, Kiki Smith, Agnes Martin, and Cindy Sherman. Each one of the twelve artists is compelling in his or her own right, and the array of artworks the reader encounters is varied in terms of media, style, and content.

Like the segments on theory, the sections devoted to the artists reflect an impressive amount of research. But in contrast to the theory segments, which have a reference book feel, the pieces on the artists read like a fluid narrative. The author interweaves the views of different critics who support, deepen, expand, complicate, or contradict each other's views. He also represents the artist's thinking, often noting how the artist's ideas relate to the vision of the critics. The reader thus witnesses an example of evolving meaning in action, where various people interpret the same artwork, albeit from different conceptual platforms. Multiple facets of the work come into focus and the reader realizes, through example, that there is a space for him or her in this collective discussion. Few authors recognize the potential interpretive contributions of non-professional art viewers as effectively as Barrett does.

Paradoxically, it is precisely the multidimensionality in the artists' portrayals that makes the application of theories to artists somewhat awkward. Time and again I found myself wondering why Barrett had placed an artist in connection to one theory and not another. To cite one example, the author presents Kiki Smith under "Expressionism and Cognitivism." Barrett validates the alignment of Smith's work to Expressionism by stating that "her work arouses emotions in viewers" (p. 97). He then clarifies that Smith's art lends itself even more aptly to Cognitivism because "it expands [viewers'] knowledge by giving them new and unique ways to look at the body, at women, and at the animal world" (p. 97).

Considering the artists in other chapters--Andres Serrano, Joan Mitchell, and Cindy Sherman, for example--couldn't one say that their work is also likely to arouse emotions in viewers? Doesn't the work of these artists also offer new and unique ways of looking at one or other aspect of the world, potentially expanding spectators' knowledge? Why,

then, are these artists' works not considered in relation to Expressionism and Cognitivism?

In addition, throughout the segment on Kiki Smith, the text hints at connections between the artist's work and ideas beyond "Expressionism and Cognitivism." Saliently, one becomes aware of the relationship between Smith and Feminism. Barrett writes that the artist has a "passionate belief in women's rights." The reader also learns that Smith's art has "contributed uniquely new ways to view women" (p. 94), that it makes "a break from the long history of male artists' exploitation of women's bodies as tools of erotic aesthetic" (p. 89), and that it often focuses on "the abject," echoing the thinking of feminist scholar Julia Kristeva.

Why, then, is Cognitivism more in sync with Kiki Smith's work than Feminism (whereas Feminism is better suited to Cindy Sherman's work than Cognitivism)? Why does the author choose to underscore interpretations that tie Smith's work to Expressionism and Cognitivism, even while he allows readers to take a look--albeit an unacknowledged one--at her closeness with feminism?

Such questions about the fit of artists and theories surface in relation to other artists as well. I couldn't help but wonder if it was Barrett's intention to illustrate that works of art, and people's reactions to them, are often too complex to be considered against just one theory. But if this was the case, why does Barrett devote most of his book to applying one theoretical approach to each artist?

Barrett explains that "this book lets the artwork decide by which criterion it is most advantageously seen, interpreted, and judged" (p. 210). This explanation raises yet more questions: Are an artwork's features always such that the work's association with a particular theory is obvious to any informed viewer? Is it possible that different people might choose to explore the same work in relation to different theories with equal success? To what extent did forces beyond the artworks--such as the artist's discourse or the critics' comments--influence Barrett's decisions? (The author's statement that "the work of Agnes Martin, in her thoughts and in those of critics, fits most comfortably within contemporary notions of Formalist theory" [p. 138] is illuminating.) Who, then, made the decision about which criterion is best suited to look at a certain work: the artwork, the artist, the critics, the book's author, or a convergence of all (or some) of these agents?

One way to alleviate the confusion regarding the artist-theory fit would have been to position theories less as sets of ideas that are actually aligned with an artists' production, and more as lenses through which a spectator might choose to read an

artwork. This conceptual platform would have still allowed for the notion that, depending on the artwork, some theoretical lenses can be more revealing than others.

To be fair, like the critics described in Chapter 1, Barrett does not regard the ideas in *Why Is That Art?* as absolutes but as contributions to an evolving conversation “that is beneficial to continue” (p. 205). This attitude is not always transparent in the main text; yet it often reveals itself in a series of sections called, “Questions for further reflection” found at the end of every chapter. The last two questions in one such section are, “Are there artists in this book that would fit better in [the chapter of Postmodern Pluralism] than where they currently are placed? Are there artists placed in [the chapter of Postmodern Pluralism] that could easily be placed in other chapters?” (p. 198). These questions hint at the flexibility of the rapport between artworks and concepts, and suggest an active role for the spectator in selecting lenses for interpreting. Still, in a book that centers on the relationship between works of art and theories about art, more solid theorizing on the complex relationship between the ideas of philosophers and the works of artists would have proven extremely constructive.

For those of us who would like to continue the discussion started in *Why Is That Art*, this text raises other thought-provoking questions. For example: How can a theoretical approach represented by various thinkers who don’t always agree which each other be applied, as a block, to an artist’s work? Do theories in fact support artworks (p. xvii), or can the relationship between artworks and theories be of a different sort (e.g. artworks inspiring theories or artworks eluding theories)? Can a viewer ever form a sound judgment or interpretation without resorting to the criteria that art theories yield? If so, how would these interpretations compare to those grounded on theory-based criteria?

Chapter 6--the conclusion of *Why Is That Art?*--“attempts to bring some comforting closure to [this] open and ongoing discussion” (p. 205), and indeed it does. The author selects a single work of art--Jeff Koons’ sculpture, *Stacked* (1988)--and applies to it key concepts explored throughout the book. Barrett thus considers *Stacked* in relation to Realistic, Expressionistic, Formalist, and Postmodern considerations. Multiple dimensions of *Stacked* come to the fore and the discomfort of aligning an artist’s work with a single theory fades away. Having read the last chapter, I left the book with a desire for more of this elastic, multilayered application--and for the additional insights and depth that more space devoted to it might have made possible.

From the standpoint of education, the criteria for looking, interpreting, and judging that this book presents are valuable for those who facilitate engagements between artworks and viewers. Familiarity with these criteria can help skilled facilitators foster deeper, richer, and more multidimensional experiences for spectators of contemporary

art. The challenge is to internalize the various criteria so they will become natural points of reference in our teaching. This way, the viewing experiences of our audiences will feel connected, organic, and alive, rather than clinical and fragmented.

As Barrett promises, readers of *Why Is That Art?* will take away knowledge about art theory, even if this knowledge is broad more than it is deep. Readers will also benefit from the dynamic portrayals of twelve influential contemporary artists. Finally, readers of *Why Is That Art?* will gain access to different criteria for interpreting and judging contemporary art and will get a sense of how these criteria can open up possibilities of meaning that extend far beyond personal preference.

About the Author

Olga Hubard earned her MA and EdD from Teachers College Columbia University, where she is currently Assistant Professor of Art Education. Olga also holds a MFA in Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts and a BA from Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico, her native country. Olga's research focuses on the relationship of young people and works of art and on what educators can do to facilitate this relationship.

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