

REVIEW

Who Says That's Art?



A Commonsense View of the Visual Arts

Michelle Marder Kamhi

"Forceful and persuasive... impressive... accessible" —Kirkus Reviews

Who Says That's Art? A Commonsense View of the Visual Arts.

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The answer to the question "Who says that's art?" is, "If Ayn Rand says so, then it's definitely art." No more mystery there. Kamhi explains in her preface that this book is an attempt at creating a more popular version of an earlier book on Ayn Rand's aesthetics- titled "What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand"(Kamhi & Torres, 2000). According to Kamhi the earlier book was effectively blacklisted by the art *cognoscenti*, so she determined to write a more accessible and popular version, for the lay public. In fact, the "common person" the non-art educated viewer is sympathetically addressed throughout the work – with mixed results. To her credit, Kamhi takes a wide-ranging look at the visual arts, art criticism and aesthetic theory- with the aim of demystifying and giving the "average viewer" avenues for contesting the opinions of critics and pundits. Kamhi addresses her un-schooled readers with these encouraging words,

... museum-goers would do well to skip the docents and audio-guides (one-way conduits for "expert" opinion) and take along a receptive friend or relative instead to talk about the work...trust yourself. You probably know a lot more about what makes for good art- because you know a lot more about life – the stuff of art-than you may think you do. (p.140)

Up to a point I share Kamhi's suspicion of "expert opinion" on the arts. In fact I remind my own students that there is no "art police"-and one's judgments of artistic merit are exempted from any sort of moral or political authority. We are free to express our artistic likes and dislikes. However, we do need to explain why we have arrived at the conclusions we defend. And in this regard, Barrett (2003) provides a much better model for independent and critical responses to art than Kamhi/Rand. He too encourages the average viewer to draw their own conclusions and to arrive at their own judgments. However he provides a systematic approach, one that goes much beyond simply eschewing "expert" opinion and touring the galleries with a friend. Barrett, unlike Kamhi, asserts that while there are no "wrong" interpretations or judgments about art, interpretations and judgments run the gamut from well-founded and persuasive to outrageous and improbable. The trouble with Barrett, from Kamhi's point of view is of course that he does not rule out of hand the artistic merits of abstract art, and post modern confections of dubious value ie: Ophili's "Dung Madonna". And these are "errors" that Kamhi will certainly not tolerate. Doctrinal heresies mark the limits of the Kamhi/Rand perspective – and the book is filled with examples of creative works that are relegated to the outer darkness of "not-art".

In addition to the narrow purview for what qualifies as art, (work that is mimetic, and that relies on classical skills such as academic drawing and painting) the text demonstrates the way in which the Kamhi/Rand "common sense approach" to art is rife with contradictions and logical inconsistencies. There is a dogmatic quality to Kamhi's exposition that narrows the debate and forces readers in a particular direction-solely on the basis of the authority of Ms. Rand's formulations. This ploy is simply to substitute one orthodoxy (the World of Art according to Rand) for another (High Modernism, Post Modernism). As such it is not very satisfactory, no matter how much one may sympathize with the position that some contemporary art and much contemporary criticism, is not worth the powder to blow it up.

As an introduction to a number of perennial problems of art, this book is a stimulating first look. Many of the key issues related to responding to art, making art, evaluating art, decoding aesthetic theory and criticism are laid out from a provocative perspective—one that may resonate with viewers who are baffled by “contemporary art”. The ten chapter headings give a fair impression of the book’s contents and its unvarnished language: (Introduction) If Art Can Be Anything, Then It Is Nothing; 1) What Exactly Are We Talking About? 2) What Qualities Make a Work of Art? 3) What’s Wrong With ‘Abstract Art; 4) Anti-Art Is Not Art; 5) Do Photography, Video and Film all Qualify as Art? 6) Critics and Curators-Informed Guides or Intellectual Bullies? 7) What Do Cognitive Science and Evolution Tell us About Art? 8) Rethinking Art Education; 9) Today’s Dysfunctional Art World – Who is To Blame? 10) The Pleasures and Rewards of Art – Real Art; Postscript: What Can Be Done?

Some readers, this reader included, may be cheered by Kamhi’s commentary on the politicization of art, and art education- the abuse of art in the service of politics and social reform. Which is not to say that art cannot address political issues, but just that the art itself comes first, and its political or social impact must come as a secondary consideration. We may also cheer when she debunks “performance artists” like Warhol or upscale tricksters like Damien Hirst.

However, a large proportion of the book is needlessly devoted to winnowing out the chaff from the wheat-art, from non-art – according to the criteria laid out by Kamhi/Rand. Much of this discussion seems to this reader to actually be about what constitutes “good” art- art of high quality and “poor” art – that is art, that fails to pass a qualitative threshold. In effect, Kamhi makes her work much harder than necessary when she insists that certain objects, works and installations are “not art” whereas it would be more persuasive to embrace the institutional theory of art (Danto) and to agree that while Rauschenberg’s “combine” falls within the category “art” if people in the know insist that it is art, and then to assert, less controversially, that Rauschenberg has not produced very good art, by many other people’s standards.

To illustrate the dangers of a dogmatic approach, we have only to look at Kamhi’s discussion of the dubious merits of Abstraction and Modernism (both of which are taxed with being the roots of all the shabby work that now falls outside the category “art”). This argument is

the bedrock for her critique of contemporary art, but it founders on some serious logical inconsistencies. For example, Kamhi faults Mondrian—one of Modernism’s founding fathers, because his theory of how art functions is completely un-scientific.

Mondrian ‘sought out basic realities of the universe’. Yet his answers to universal questions are by no means the same as those offered by science. On the contrary, as shown in Chapter 3, his answers to such questions were drastically at odds with those of modern science. (p.143.)

Thus, Kamhi’s critique of Mondrian’s modernist experimentation (and that of Kandinsky and Malevitch) is that their art was based on “...a series of ill-founded assumptions about the workings of the human mind-assumptions that have since been largely disproven by the findings of modern science.” (p.52). So Kamhi insists that where art and artists theorize in ways that are unsupported by science, their art will, of necessity fail. This is an embarrassing cul de sac for Kamhi to find herself in, for it then becomes necessary to explain how she can lavish praise on one the richest and most moving legacies of the visual arts – namely religious art. Religious belief has no scientific basis. It is a product of the human imagination, a desire for order and meaning – but science does not and never has concerned itself with establishing the basis for religion. Gould (1999) makes this point in his discussion of religion and science as occupying Non-Overlapping Magisteriates.

Yet, Kamhi writes glowing prose about some of the most famous religious works – The Pieta, Michelangelo’s frescoes, Durer’s painting of St. Matthew, etc. If ever there were works founded on un-scientific assumptions about the universe –religious art is a treasure house of such “erroneous” thought. So, in damning Modernist /Abstract art for its “unscientific” foundations, and praising Religious art, Kamhi invites two substantial critiques- 1) She cannot have it both ways – if an unscientific basis disqualifies Modernist art, then it must disqualify religious art as well. Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.(And it will not suffice to indicate that religious art is “representational” while abstract art is not.) 2) Kamhi’s critique of Modernism is based on its lack of scientific rigor. She invokes the findings of “modern science” as a way of critiquing Modernist artists. But artists are not scientists and should not be expected to entertain or appropriate scientific thought unless it has some artistic function.

Art is not “factual” in the way that science is, nor should it be held to the same standards. In fact it is perverse to do so. Nevertheless the connection between Art – both abstract and mimetic – is powerfully connected to our neuroanatomy and our evolutionary history. In art objects we can see the workings of our ancient eyes and brains (Stafford, 2007).

Kamhi’s faith in the evidence of our senses-in the title of her book she identifies her approach as “commonsensical” is a dangerous and simplistic strategy for any observer, – scientist or artist. Referring to the swindle of Modern abstract art, she warns us against pretending to see “...what cannot be seen, and to deny seeing what one really does see.” (p.51). The reason her advice is misleading is that “the evidence of our senses” is sometimes completely untrustworthy, the most dramatic example of this being that we “see” the sun move around the earth, when in fact it is the earth that moves. Modern physics shows that at the atomic level, matter consists mostly of space yet that is not the way we experience the physical world. And there are plenty of other examples. To accept the evidence of our senses uncritically is a risky business – yet Kamhi endorses this unreservedly. She states, “...the height of human folly is to deny the evidence of one’s senses” (p.51).

Another feature of the book is the slightly peeved tone that Kamhi adopts when the authorities that she cites provide her support for some of her points, but fail to endorse her final conclusions. There is a veritable rogues gallery of art critics and other experts who provide grist for Kamhi’s mill, but fail to deliver the ringing denunciation of abstract art that she feels is the mark of a truly informed critic. Thus, Robert Hughes (1996), is taxed with failing to condemn Modernist abstraction as a sham. What Kamhi cannot fathom is how an artist can embrace bizarre theories while still making what is considered great art. She is puzzled and disappointed that Hughes describes Mondrian’s metaphysical beliefs as utter woolly nonsense, but then asserts that Mondrian was an artist of genius. To this reader, Hughes’ position seems completely reasonable – Mondrian was an artist, not a philosopher/physicist, so Hughes judges him on the quality of his art, not his philosophy. Similarly- Kamhi has a hard time absorbing the fact that some of the staunchest purveyors of post-modernist criticism – Arthur Danto, (1981) for one, take modernist and post modern art very seriously, but admit that as far as their personal preferences go, they prefer the “old masters” and the impressionists.

These “inconsistencies” are easily explained: Danto and the other critics such as Greenberg (1999) were professionals. They developed theories and applied them as consistently as they could to contemporary art. Their personal tastes did not enter into their professional judgments. And that is to their credit. Kamhi’s critique of these pundits, for failing to deliver the coup de grace, bespeaks her dogmatic rigidity.

Kamhi’s list of eminent disappointments is long and includes among others; Arnheim(1969), Dutton (2009), Edelman (2004), Lakoff (2006), Pinker(2002), Solso(2003). To Kamhi’s consternation all of these folks drank the Modernist Kool Aid. Surely, at some point Kamhi must have asked herself “How can so many people that I recognize as informed and intelligent be so wrong? Is it possible that I (and Ms. Rand) are the odd women out?” But if Kamhi’s faith in Rand ever waivered in this fashion, we see no trace of a re-assessment in this book.

Given my significant reservations about the positions taken in this book I nevertheless endorse it as a useful addition to any undergraduate or graduate reading list. I endorse it for several reasons. The first is that it gives voice to opinions and claims that many naïve viewers of the art scene will find congenial. It may be useful for these Randian “fellow travellers” to trace out just how far and where their “commonsensical” responses to visual art may lead them. Kamhi’s work illustrates a certain approach to aesthetic issues that starts with some plainly stated *a-priori*s and then spells out the conclusions that follow. Because of this clear structure –sympathetic but reflective readers will be forced to face the paradoxical conclusions to which such *a-priori*s lead. I.e: Given that worthy Art must somehow exist in harmony with scientific fact, how to reconcile the obvious power and excellence of religious art, an art founded on faith not science? To cite a poet- “the center cannot hold.”

The second is simply a matter of balance – and the opportunity for students to exercise their critical strategies: They can learn a lot by critiquing arguments (historical, aesthetic) that they find illogical or flawed, and once they have applied logic to some of the claims made in this work, they may be less shy about developing an equally telling analysis of material that originates “on the other side of the tracks”- that is, approaches to visual art, popular culture etc. that are grounded in either the work of the Frankfort School, and/or the necromancy of the Post-Modernists. I have

used Kamhi's essay (2010) on the politicization of art education (*The Hijacking of Art Education*) with good results in my graduate art education seminars. Responses to her commentary were the basis for lively discussion, but few readers were convinced by her somewhat hyperbolic attack on the politicized world of art education.

I do not share Kamhi's futile attempt to define all modernist/abstract art and all postmodern art as "not Art". But she offers the interesting speculation that it is precisely the obscurity and abstraction of these art forms that has led to the sorts of artistic and aesthetic abuses that she finds so disturbing. Deprived of accessible meaning and emotional release artists and their audiences have embraced the easy solution of inserting liberatory politics and an inverted sense of the authentic into their expectations for art. She suggests that it is in fact the quest for meaningful art in the face of the arid compositions of modernist and post modern art that have led to the two key problems she identifies in her chapter on contemporary art education: 1) The eclipse of the aesthetic features of art by its political content, and 2) The degraded and degrading quality of art work that is often proposed as a model for students to appreciate. I agree that these twin plagues do indeed trouble art education as it is currently practiced in North America. (See Pariser, 2009,2010)

The first is the growing trend to value the political content of artwork above and beyond more traditional features such as the skill shown, aesthetic impact etc. Worth noting here is the widespread understanding that politically expressive artwork must of course fly the red banner of progressive social justice as opposed to any other flag of convenience. Thus, the understanding among art educators seems to be that political views to the left of center are one of the prerequisites for any work of art worthy of the name. I find that this trend is best illustrated in a recent collection of essays (Tavin & Morris, 2013): *Stand(ing) up for a change: Voices of art educators*. It features "activist" art educators detailing the ways in which their instructional activities in schools and universities are all, first and foremost "political", and it is no surprise that the political spectrum ranges from far to near left of center with no voices from the center or center-right.

The second trend is a corollary to the first – that is a tendency, because of concerns with "progressive" political activism, or the simple desire for notoriety at any cost, to present unskilled and minimally

accomplished works of art as models for classroom study and emulation. I do not argue that such work is "not art", just that it is a very poor representative of the species. Kamhi is right to reference the works of such "important" artists as Acconci and Burden as examples of tasteless shock merchants. More recently, the art educators Tavin and Tavin (2014) have written glowing endorsements of two artists, one Finnish and the other Chinese, whose work (framed as political critique) involve beheading a cat, public masturbation and cannibalism. Tavin and Tavin (2014) suggest that work by these two artists ought to be included in High School art syllabi as a way of critiquing the violence inherent in late capitalism. To suggest that such offensive and valueless work be used in an art classroom strengthens Kamhi's point that some art educators are so blinded by their desire for "progressive critique" that they cannot distinguish between good art and bad, or in Kamhi's formulation "art" and "non-art".

More over, I agree with Kamhi when she suggests that for students beginning their acquaintance with visual art, one should start with traditional material of high quality from their own culture/regions – as Yenawine (2003) suggests. As an example of the use of low-quality art that tries to compensate for its lack of traditional craft and aesthetic impact by its political message Kamhi mentions Wertheimer's "Brinco", a "performance piece" that dramatizes the plight of illegal immigrants from South America. As Kamhi points out, this artwork has nothing in common with more traditional works of art that rely on graphic skill and that are "representational". Here again, Kamhi's doctrinaire response seems like overkill. It would be sufficient to indicate that the artwork simply fails to inform and move the public who see it.

Kamhi's discussion of art education contains a series of criticisms – many of which will resonate with any fair-minded reader. She notes the decline in graphic skills among artists who are held in high esteem by the art world (ie. Damien Hirst) and a corresponding devaluation of instruction in graphic skills among art educators. It has been my observation that it is Chinese art students who are now far more likely than Western art students to demonstrate a solid mastery of Western academic drawing skills. Kamhi mentions the fact that art students in most North American academies – while not learning much in the way of studio skills are well trained in providing semi-obscure "explanations" and "interpretative guides" to their installations, performances etc. The hegemony of the written word

over the artwork is hardly a new phenomenon. In 1976 Tom Wolfe wrote his devastating critique of the New York art scene – titled “The Painted Word”. His point was that much of the art produced on the New York scene at the time was totally dependent on the words of artists and critics to make it comprehensible. He predicted that in the future, explanatory texts would dominate the artworks themselves. And indeed his prophetic vision has come to pass.

Moving on from artists’ lack of graphic skills and their dependence on explanatory texts, Kamhi launches an attack on Visual Culture Studies, another growing field among art educators. Here again, it is the transparently left politics (“late capitalism” and “neo liberal” are frequently used terms of opprobrium in Visual Culture Studies) that Kamhi finds totally unacceptable along with the implication that the objects of Visual Culture studies are considered “art”. However, Kamhi’s penchant for sweeping generalizations does her no favors as she fails to distinguish among the art educators who endorse Visual Culture Studies. She is equally dismissive of the work of both Tavin (2006) and of Duncum (2007), both of whom are engaged with Visual Culture studies. This is an error, as Tavin is a professional “young turk” who delights in shocking his academic audience with radical posturing (See Tavin 2006) as contrasted with Duncum (2007) whose approach is more measured and scholarly, and whose intent is not to shock but to engage his readers with a new perspective on art education. However, as far as Kamhi is concerned there is no difference in what these two scholars have to offer as they are both “political” and they both address visual culture within the framework of “art”. Once again Kamhi’s dogmatism does not permit her to make reasonable distinctions when there is ample reason to do so.

In fairness, it must be noted that Kamhi does not tar ALL art education scholars with the same brush. She has praise for an art educator from a previous generation – Kenneth Lansing (1971) who urged art teachers to define the term “art” before attempting to teach about it. Likewise she endorses the art educator Philip Yenawine (2003) for his position on the sorts of images that art teachers should use in the their classrooms. Kamhi gives some guarded praise both to the Discipline Based Art Education program championed by Eisner and to the Visual Thinking Strategies curriculum of Housen and Yenawine . Kamhi approves of the thematic approach adopted by these programs but predictably bemoans that fact that they

do not exclude Modernist, abstract, or post-modern art as objects for study. On the other hand Kamhi has unreserved praise for Esquith (2005) an award winning teacher in Los Angeles who successfully immerses his Hispanic and African American pupils in visual art. The core of his program consists of performing the works of Shakespeare. Here she makes the point that “real art” because it deals with universal human themes is thus capable of reaching even those who have the least “cultural capital.” The notion of art as speaking to our common humanity seems uncontroversial enough, but it will, of course, be savaged by those who find such assumptions riddled with the poison of “universalism”.

In response to the question: “What should art educators teach?” Kamhi has some concrete suggestions: In the first place Western students should be exposed to “the best” in art over the centuries ie: works from the Western Pantheon. In the spirit of pluralism she acknowledges that children not living in the West should be exposed to the finest examples of classical art from their own cultures. One of Kamhi’s more surprising recommendations is that children in elementary school and beyond need not be bothered much with studio work, and here, Kamhi cites Eisner (2002) for support. She claims that when he notes that most students in art class do not go on to become artists he is downgrading the importance of studio work in art class. But here Kamhi is in error, as the force of Eisner’s observation is not to eliminate studio practice from art classes. As Eisner (2002) makes clear, one of the important aims of the art educator is to engage the student with the making of art – regardless of whether the student will become a practicing artist or not. “... art educators should help students learn how to create and experience the aesthetic features of images and understand their relationship to the culture of which they are a part.” (p.43). In his comment, Eisner places creating art on an equal footing with appreciating it. Kamhi grants that in high school there ought to be room for an intensive and traditional drawing course, however the basic aims of art education, according to her is to help students to become, “...perceptive consumers and patrons of the arts.” (p.185). We gain a little insight into Kamhi’s thought process regarding studio classes when we learn that her skepticism about the need for hands-on activities in art class is based in part on her own negative experiences. She recalls that in her high school art class, “Having little natural ability and without systematic instruction, I went through the motions of various assignments with little sense I was

learning anything.” (p.185). To decide that no children or adolescents need hands-on art making experiences largely on the basis of her brush with poor art teaching in high school is capricious and unconvincing.

Barrett (2002) merits the last word on this discussion of Kamhi’s book. He states,

To the accusation “That’s not art!” there is a simple distinction that can prove very helpful. The distinction is between the use of the term ‘art’ as a *descriptive* term or as an *evaluative* term. Its two uses are often conflated to mean the same thing, but they do not. To call a DeKooning a “painting” is to identify it as a certain kind of a thing and to distinguish it from other kinds of things. It’s a piece of art: it is not a cherry pie, or a baseball bat. ... Saying “That’s a work of art” in this descriptive sense is not to praise it, but to identify it, in the same way that saying “ That’s a cherry pie” is not to say that its necessarily a *delicious* cherry pie. But we also use ‘art’ in an evaluative sense or in an honorific sense. ...Thus when some people say, “That’s not a work of art,” they, mean that it is not a good work of art and does not deserve the honorific title of art at all. (p.108)

And that, in a nutshell is the root problem with Kamhi’s approach. Kamhi’s confused use of the term “art” as an exclusively evaluative term, obscures the otherwise helpful and needed aspects of her critique.

I urge the inclusion of this book on the undergraduate and graduate reading list, for it will generate debate and engaged discussion. Some students will feel freer to give voice to their mystification in the face of some of the excesses of the contemporary art world. For others it will provide a first cut through the artists, critics and observers who contribute to the contemporary art world. And for many students, it will provide an excellent opportunity to absorb Kamhi’s critique and to develop a counter-critique of their own, or even to develop a more effective critique of Post-modernism, and contemporary art than Kamhi is able to offer.

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