

Who Says That's Art?



A Commonsense View of the Visual Arts

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

REVIEW • RESPONSE

... to David Pariser's Review of:

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

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First, my sincere thanks to David Pariser (2015) for reviewing my book, and for urging its inclusion on "any undergraduate or graduate reading list." (52, 55) As he notes, we agree on many important points. Despite his "significant reservations" (52) on some points, he maintains that the book will serve to stimulate thoughtful discussion—which is exactly what I had hoped it would do. I especially appreciate his judgment that it "is a stimulating first look" at "[m]any of the key issues related to responding to art, making art, evaluating art, [and] decoding aesthetic theory and criticism" (51).

My aim here is to respond to his most significant reservations, correct a few fundamental misreadings on his part, and highlight what I see as the book's value for art teachers. A key aspect of that value is a more thoroughly informed view of art history and aesthetics than that presented in standard accounts. My revisionist account reveals the muddled thinking that has led to a present breakdown in the very concept of *art*.¹

The Need for Definitions

In the contemporary artworld across the globe, virtually anything now qualifies as "visual art"—even *nonvisual* genres such as "sound art." Such "blurring of the boundaries," not only between media but also between art and life itself, is generally welcomed by critics, curators, and other pundits. In addition,

former distinctions between categories of visual art such as "fine" and "decorative" art have been jettisoned. The resulting debacle is troubling to many art lovers, however. It is also problematic for teachers attempting to deal with the often bizarre inventions that now pass for visual art. This breakdown of definitions and standards—which is increasingly reflected in art education in the U.S.—is what moved me to write *Who Says That's Art?* Though I'm not familiar with Canadian art education, I suspect that it, too, may suffer from that breakdown.

According to the artworld's prevailing "institutional theory," anything put forward by a purported artist qualifies as "art." In Pariser's view, the critical question then becomes, Is it *good* art? In my contrasting view, logic requires us to have some idea of what "art" is in order to determine who qualifies as an "artist." (2014, 5) Moreover, judgments regarding "good" or "bad" art ultimately depend on an underlying idea of the essential nature of art—that is, on an implicit or explicit definition of art.

As I ask by way of analogy, could we properly judge a chair, for example, if we did not know that chairs serve to be sat on—a function that entails certain relevant properties? The same principle holds true for art, albeit with more complex ramifications. Without some agreed-on criteria regarding the nature and function of art, it is impossible to evaluate individual works on other than a purely subjective, arbitrary basis.

What Is My Definition of Art Based On?

The most egregious of Pariser's misreadings is reflected in his opening sentence (50). Declaring that my answer to the question of what art is amounts to "If Ayn Rand says so, then it's definitely art," he implies that I am a slavish adherent who uncritically adopts her view of the subject whole cloth. Nothing could be farther from the truth.²²

In *Who Says That's Art?*—as in *What Art Is* (Torres & Kamhi, 2000)—Rand's theory of art is considered in relation both to ideas proposed by other thinkers and to the art of diverse cultures, including non-European civilizations and tribal cultures (2014, 23–32). While disagreeing with Rand on many points, I accept the basic assumptions and principles of her theory, because they have the widest explanatory power, applicable cross-culturally. In addition, they are the most consistent with what science has been teaching us about the nature of human cognition and emotion (162–65).

One of Rand's fundamental premises is the traditional distinction between "fine" and "decorative" art. Works of "fine" art (chiefly, painting and sculpture) serve an exclusively *psychological* need, while objects of "decorative" art have a primarily *physical* function. In recent years, that useful functional distinction has been mistakenly dismissed by scholars and critics as an invention of eighteenth-century European culture irrelevant to other times and places. As I document, however, it is clearly *implicit* in the practice of other cultures (27–31). I therefore conclude that the "fine" arts of visual imagery

form a distinctive category of human activity that is universally relevant. In all known cultures, they have served as the chief means of expressing in an emotionally compelling form things considered important to remember and reflect upon (31).

It is with that category of art that my book is primarily concerned, and for which I offer the following working definition: "Visual art is imagery that skillfully represents real or imagined people, places, and things in a form expressive of the maker's temperament, deeply held values, and view of life" (34).

What's Wrong with Abstract Art?

One of Pariser's main objections is to my "dogmatic" critique of abstract art. The foregoing distinction between "fine" and "decorative" art is crucial to that critique, as is the nature of human cognition. In the latter connection, I argue that the invention of "abstract" (nonobjective) art by Kandinsky, Mondrian, and others was a misguided enterprise because it 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" (52). Pariser maintains (51) that this is an "embarrassing cul de sac" for me, because it appears inconsistent with my avowed admiration for works of religious art such as "Dürer's painting of Saint Matthew" (my reference was actually to Dürer's engraving *St. Jerome in His Study*). "Religious belief has no scientific basis," he argues. That claim is irrelevant to my argument, however.

The problem with the invention of abstract art was not that the artists held "unscientific" beliefs, but rather that such beliefs misled them to think they could create meaningful work without imagery. Tellingly, they insisted that their work was profoundly meaningful—not merely "decorative." Yet they constantly feared that it would be perceived in the latter category, a fear that haunted their successors as well. (56–57, 60–61) As they sensed (and as Rand rightly insisted), the essential language of art is imagery; in its absence, painting and sculpture become mute.

The relevant point regarding traditional artists such as Dürer is that they represented their religious subjects in terms of things based on the natural world—that is, in images of people, places and things that viewers can recognize—even when the subjects represented belong to an imaginary “unscientific” realm. Unlike abstract work, such art is objectively intelligible, because it conforms broadly to the way in which we grasp reality.

Another point misconstrued by Pariser relates to my observation (51) that “it is the height of human folly to deny the evidence of one’s senses” by attempting to find meaning in abstract work, he argues that our senses are in fact unreliable, since modern physics “shows that at the atomic level, matter consists mostly of space yet that is not the way we experience the physical world” (52). Such an argument is irrelevant with respect to visual art, however—which properly deals with the world as we experience it *visually*, not on the atomic level. Nor does the fact that many eminent thinkers have (in my view as characterized by Pariser) “dr[u]nk the Modernist Kool Aid” necessarily outweigh the sense of countless art lovers that abstract art is unintelligible. The cultural cachet of abstract art as “advanced” and sophisticated readily explains why many prominent intellectuals have attempted to find meaning in such work.

I therefore stand by my book’s answer to the question “What’s wrong with abstract art?”:

Nothing—if one is willing to regard it as merely decorative; that is, as having some visual interest or appeal owing merely to its color or design. But if one insists on claiming that it is an intelligible vehicle of meaning or emotional expression, I think it must be viewed as an essentially failed enterprise.

What Pariser rejects as “dogmatic rigidity” (p. 52) I call definitional clarity. If teachers choose to discuss abstract work—given its prominence in accounts of modern art history—they ought at least to point out this alternative perspective on its value.

Barrett vs. Kamhi

As a preferable alternative to my “dogmatic” approach, Pariser recommends the open-ended stance adopted by Terry Barrett (2003)—in large part because Barrett “does not rule out . . . the artistic merits of abstract art” (50). This recommendation merits scrutiny. Significantly, Barrett and I agree on some key principles. One is that works of art “are always about something” (Barrett, 198–99). Another is that a work’s meaning emerges from the way the subject matter is handled by the artist (199–200). So it is instructive to see how differently we apply these principles.

Remarkably, Barrett devotes more than ten pages to the abstract painter Sean Scully (b. 1945)—who has spent a lifetime painting nothing but stripes. What are Scully’s striped canvases “about”? Barrett accepts (101, 100) Scully’s claim that his work is “very much about . . . relationships” and is full of “confrontations with ‘good and evil.’” But if the meaning of a work emerges from the way the subject matter is handled, what is the “subject matter” of Scully’s work? Stripes scarcely constitute what is generally meant by that term—which, as Barrett himself notes (199), refers to “the recognizable stuff in a work of art: persons, places, things, and so forth.” As he further observes, “much abstract art . . . purposefully omits subject matter” (199–200). Based on his own stated principles, therefore, should he not conclude that it is, in effect, meaningless?

In any case, would anyone confronted by Scully’s paintings, with no knowledge of what he says about his work, be likely to see anything more than patterns of stripes? Such a viewer would, I think, be hard pressed to say what Scully’s work is “about,” still more so to think it is about a “relationship” or a “confrontation with good and evil.”

Consider, in contrast, a painting that actually represents a relationship—Jan van Eyck’s famed *Arnolfini Portrait* (discussed in my book [41–42]). Its clearly discernible subject matter is a man and a woman in an elegant bedchamber. Moreover, this work (unlike Scully’s inscrutable abstractions) is intelligible, although it is separated from us by nearly six centuries of changing customs and mores. Even an untutored viewer might guess, from such features as the couple’s solemn expression and joining of hands, that this painting is about the deep significance of a marital relationship.

Conclusion

Space limitations preclude my responding to all of Pariser’s objections and misreadings.³ But his conviction that teachers should adopt a more open-ended approach to recent work than I do merits a closing rebuttal. If Canadian art teachers face constraints at all comparable to those of their counterparts in the U.S., should they not be wary of allocating precious resources to work of uncertain value? I recommend minimal attention to modernist and postmodernist inventions that have not yet stood the test of time.

References

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Notes

(Endnotes)

- 1 Among the widespread misconceptions corrected in my account is the claim that the influential philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) propounded a “formalist” view of art which paved the way for modern “abstract art.” I further show that postmodernist inventions such as “conceptual” and “performance” art began as explicitly *anti-art* gestures, and therefore weren’t *art* even in the eyes of their own creators. Yet they now dominate the “art” world.
- 2 For a talk highlighting some of my disagreements with Rand, see Kamhi, 2015. See also Kamhi & Torres, 2000, in which we partly blame her for the critical neglect of her theory of art.
- 3 A significant misreading is Pariser’s claim (54) that I recommend against studio work for “children in elementary school.” I wrote: “Critical though I am of . . . compulsory studio work at the higher grade levels, I recognize that hands-on activities and opportunities for pictorial self-expression are crucial in the early years.” (184–85)