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# ART RETHOUGHT

The Social Practices of Art

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF

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# ART RETHOUGHT

## Preface

In *After the End of Art*, Arthur Danto describes the awakening he experienced in April 1964 in the Stable Gallery in New York City.<sup>1</sup> The gallery was exhibiting Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* sculpture. The exhibition awakened Danto to the fact that something new was happening in the art world; he later described what was happening as "the end of art."

In the mid-1960s I also experienced an art awakening. It happened on a Saturday afternoon in my living room in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was listening to the University of Michigan radio station. Normally the U of M station played classical music on Saturday afternoons; on this particular Saturday afternoon the announcer declared that the program would be devoted to work songs. I listened, fascinated, for about fifteen minutes. Then the awakening.

I was teaching our department's course in philosophy of art, using as the text for the course Monroe Beardsley's recently published *Aesthetics*.<sup>2</sup> Beardsley's approach to art was predicated on the assumption that art is a special sphere of life and that leisure is required if we are to engage works of the arts as they are meant to be engaged, namely, as objects of aesthetic attention. In my teaching I had gone along with this assumption; for fifteen minutes or so that's how I engaged the songs being played on the radio. But then cognitive dissonance set in. The thought came to mind that though the station was presenting these songs as works to be engaged as objects of aesthetic attention, that is not how they were originally engaged; they were sung while working.

At the time I did not know what to do with this dissonant thought. Could it be that Beardsley did not know about work songs? That seemed implausible. And in any case, I had known of their existence long before listening to them on that Saturday afternoon. Could it be that work songs

1. Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

2. Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1958).

are not art and hence not something that philosophers of art would pay attention to? But they are works of music, and music is one of the arts; isn't that enough to make them something that philosophers of art would take account of? Or was Beardsley perhaps assuming, and was I going along with the assumption, that work songs are inherently inferior music and hence not worth the philosopher's attention? If so, inferior in what way? I found them fascinating to listen to, as, presumably, did the station programmer. And those who originally sang them must have found them good for singing while working.

It took me several years to think through the implications of my awakening. What eventually emerged was my book, *Art in Action*,<sup>3</sup> in which I argued that to understand art we have to give up the idea that works of the arts are autonomous loci of meaning and significance, and instead attend to the ways in which they are embedded in action. I made a point of arguing that there are many different ways in which we engage works of the arts, many different actions for which works of the arts function as objects and accompaniments. To understand work songs we have to understand them as sung to accompany and enhance work; to understand symphonies we have to understand them as performed for absorbed listening by the public; and so forth.

That left me with a pressing question: if this is true, why did Beardsley make claims and assumptions about art that are patently false for many of the ways in which we engage works of the arts? Why have a good many other philosophers of art of the modern period done the same? Why had I done so as well? Why have philosophers of art of the modern period often presented as universal what is true only of particular forms of art and of particular ways of engaging art? They have said that art requires leisure. That is certainly true for piano sonatas, violin concertos, and the like; but it is patently false for work songs functioning as work songs. They have said that art is useless, that it has "no reason for being outside itself, but possesses its entire value and the goal of its existence in itself."<sup>4</sup> That has considerable plausibility for lyric poems, symphonies, modern dance, and the like; but it has no plausibility whatsoever for work songs, hymns, and many other forms of art.

3. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980).

4. The passage comes from the late-eighteenth-century writer, Karl Philipp Moritz. It is quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 155.

The answer I proposed in *Art in Action* was that philosophers of art of the modern period have typically had their eye on what I called our *modern institution of high art*. I argued that this institution has been organized around just one way of engaging works of the arts, namely, as objects of aesthetic attention; and I observed that the generalizations that philosophers of art of the modern period have made about art are true, or close to being true, for art as we find it in that institution. I went on to argue, however, that those of us who are philosophers of art should expand our perspective and take note not just of aesthetic attention as a way of engaging works of the arts but also of the many other ways in which art enters into the fabric of human life.

I now think that, rather than speaking of our modern *institution* of high art, I should instead have used Max Weber's language and spoken of our modern *art world*; it was our modern art world that I had in mind. The art world includes institutions in the strict sense—museums, symphony orchestras, academies, and the like—but it is not itself an institution. It is instead a distinct sphere of human activity, comparable to the world of finance, the world of medicine, the world of higher education, and the like.

Those who take up this present book will naturally wonder how it relates to that earlier *Art in Action*. The answer is that it deepens and expands the line of thought that I began there, fills in some lacunae, and here and there corrects what I said.

First, in *Art in Action*, I was thinking too atomistically about the actions in question. Art is indeed embedded in actions of many different sorts; that point remains valid. But those actions, for the most part, are performed within the context of long-enduring, ever-changing, *social practices* and cannot be understood apart from understanding those practices. It is those practices that are basic: practices of creation, practices of performance and display, practices of public engagement.

Second, some time after I began thinking in terms of the social practices of art it became clear to me that I could not say what I wanted to say, about engaging works of the arts in ways other than as objects of aesthetic attention, without employing the idea of the *meaning* of a work of the arts. The idea of the meaning of a work does not appear in *Art in Action*.

Third, the explanation I gave in *Art in Action*, for why it is that philosophers of art of the modern period have regularly claimed as universal what is in fact often true only of art as we find it in our modern art world, was that they suffered from tunnel vision. Their gaze has been so fixed on the art

of our modern art world that they have failed to notice all the other ways in which art in the past, and yet today, enters into human action. I continue to believe that that is the case. But what I did not do in *Art in Action* was ask, in turn, why they have suffered from this malady of tunnel vision; I said nothing to counteract the thought that it was pure happenstance.

I now think it was not happenstance; it was because of the grip on their thought and imagination of what I call *the grand narrative* concerning art in the modern world. The grand narrative is a story of the large art-historical and sociological significance of changes that took place in the arts in the early modern period. Corresponding to the grand narrative are propositions specifying that significance abstractly; I call them the *grand narrative theses*. That narrative and those theses have constituted the framework for almost all thinking and writing by philosophers of art of the modern period that touches on the role of art in the lives of members of modernized societies. A great deal of what they have said about art falls into place once we see this; for example, the claim that art requires leisure. What also falls into place is the virtual silence of philosophers of art about memorial art, social protest art, ritual and liturgical art, work songs, and much more besides. Part One of this present book is devoted to presenting the grand narrative and the grand narrative theses.

I should make clear that the influence of the grand narrative has by no means extended to all the topics that philosophers of art in the modern period have written about. Philosophers of art have offered theories of interpretation, theories of representation, theories of expression; they have developed theories of the ontology of works of the arts. The grand narrative has no bearing on such theories. It was when philosophers touched on the role of art in the lives of those of us who are members of modernized societies that the grand narrative shaped their thought.

Fourth, the world of the visual arts has changed radically over the years since *Art in Action* was published. I took note there of some early versions of these developments; but the changes have proceeded apace since then. In Part Two of this present essay I discuss the significance for philosophy of art of these recent developments. It turns out that the grand narrative theses have no application whatsoever to much of the art of the present-day visual art world. I develop this point in Chapter 6.

Last, though I argued as vigorously as I could in *Art in Action* for reconfiguring the discipline of philosophy of art by including in our reflections



the many ways in which we human beings engage works of the arts other than as objects of aesthetic attention, I did not take the obvious next step of actually analyzing some of those alternative modes of engagement. Though I referred to memorial art, I did not analyze what we are doing when we create a work of the arts as a memorial of some person or event. Ironically, I talked more about aesthetic attention than about any other mode of engagement. Parts Four through Eight of this present book are devoted to analyzing some of the more important of the alternative ways of engaging works of the arts.

Throughout my discussion, the general term that I will use for interacting with some work of the arts is "engage"; I will speak of *engaging* a work of the arts, aesthetic attention being one among other modes of engagement. I prefer "engage" to "interact with" because it connotes greater intensity than does the term "interact with." It has the defect, however, of evoking too one-sided a picture of what transpires when we engage a work of the arts. Not only do we engage the work; the work engages us. We act on it and it acts on us. The engagement is mutual. That should be kept in mind throughout.

I judge that the influence of the grand narrative has weakened considerably over the past thirty or forty years. Not many philosophers would today affirm, for example, the social exceptionalism that, as we shall see, was regularly attributed to art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and in the first half of the twentieth. It is for that reason that, when speaking of the influence of the grand narrative, I spoke of its influence on philosophers *of the modern period*. I meant to exclude, from my comments about influence, philosophy written recently. With few exceptions, the passages that I will quote as expressions of the grand narrative were written before 1980.

As a result of the waning of the influence of the grand narrative, the topics discussed by philosophers of art and by aestheticians in recent years have been far more diverse than they were previously. Though it was widely held by writers of the modern period that art has some intimate relation to the aesthetic, no one held, conversely, that the aesthetic dimension is limited to art. Nature was held to have aesthetic qualities; and the aesthetic dimension of nature was a common topic of discussion in the nineteenth century. In recent years, discussions of the aesthetic dimension have expanded far beyond art and nature to include the aesthetics of food, the

aesthetics of ruins, the aesthetics of everyday objects, and a good deal more besides.<sup>5</sup>

So too, philosophers of art have freed themselves from the traditional preoccupation with high art and, in recent years, have discussed jazz, rock music, outsider art, non-Western art, performance art, computer art, conceptual art, and more besides. What remains the case, however, is that almost all the art discussed has been art meant to be engaged as object of, if not disinterested aesthetic attention, then at least absorbed attention. I think the most plausible explanation for this situation is that the grand narrative, in this respect at least, continues to shape our thinking.

My aim in this essay, then, is four-fold: after articulating the grand narrative, to explain why it should be rejected in its entirety; to call for theorizing about the many ways in which we engage works of the arts in addition to engaging them as objects of disinterested aesthetic attention, and more generally, as objects of absorbed attention; to provide a framework for this more comprehensive theorizing; and to apply the framework by analyzing in some detail a few of the other ways in which we engage works of the arts and the works so engaged.

Not only have aestheticians and philosophers of art ranged widely in recent years in the topics they have discussed; some have issued programmatic calls for reconfiguring the fields of aesthetics and philosophy of art; I am by no means the only one calling for reconfiguration. I think it will aid the reader's understanding of the reconfiguration I am calling for if I briefly compare it with the reconfigurations called for, and instituted in their own work, by a few other philosophers of art.

In a number of books, but especially in *Art and Engagement*<sup>6</sup> and in *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts*,<sup>7</sup> Arnold Berleant inveighs against the traditional understanding of aesthetic engagement as a form of disinterested contemplation. Disinterested contemplation, he argues, is a passive phenomenon. What art calls for is not passive contemplation but "active participation of the perceiver"; he calls it "appreciative

5. To cite just one example from the many that could be cited: Jane Forsey, in her recent *The Aesthetics of Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), calls for the discipline of philosophical aesthetics to move beyond its traditional preoccupation with works of the arts to include the aesthetics of commercial and industrial design; she then does what she calls for.

6. Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

7. Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

engagement.”<sup>8</sup> It is this that philosophers should be analyzing and illuminating. He then argues that appreciative engagement extends well beyond traditional fine art to popular art, to folk art, and to recent revolutionary developments in the art world. After rethinking the nature of aesthetic engagement, philosophers of art should include these other forms of art in their reflections.

Berleant thus rejects the hegemony enjoyed by fine art in traditional philosophy of art. But the hegemony of the aesthetic, when rethought, remains in place; he takes no note of any other way of engaging works of the arts than as objects of aesthetic attention. He describes aesthetic engagement as “perception that is quantitatively more intense and qualitatively more varied and complex on aesthetic occasions than in ordinary experience.”<sup>9</sup> As we shall see, intensified perception is not the point of memorial art, of art for veneration, of social protest art, of work songs. “Audience appreciation”<sup>10</sup> is not what these ways of engaging works of the arts are all about.

In two impressive collections of essays, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*<sup>11</sup> and *Art in Three Dimensions*,<sup>12</sup> Noël Carroll also argues for a reconfiguration. Accepting a more or less traditional understanding of the aesthetic, he notes that when we attentively look at, listen to, or read some work of fine art, we typically do not attend only to its aesthetic qualities but also to its moral vision, its political import, its cultural significance, and so forth. He argues that philosophers of art should honor this practice by concerning themselves not just with the aesthetic significance of works of fine art but with their significance for absorbed attention in all its dimensions; he thus goes beyond Berleant in rejecting the traditional hegemony of the aesthetic.

After arguing for expanding our analysis of absorbed attention to include non-aesthetic considerations, Carroll goes on to note that multi-faceted absorbed attention is not confined to works of fine art but extends to many other works of the arts as well; and he argues that the scope of our inquiries should accordingly be expanded to include those other works. He thus joins Berleant in rejecting the hegemony, in traditional philosophy of art, of fine

8. Berleant, *Re-Thinking Aesthetics*, 33. One of his best brief descriptions of what he has in mind is on p. 35.

9. Berleant, *Re-Thinking Aesthetics*, 49.

10. Berleant, *Re-Thinking Aesthetics*, 33.

11. Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

12. Noël Carroll, *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

art. In *A Philosophy of Mass Art*<sup>13</sup> he heeds his own advice and goes where few philosophers before him have gone, namely, into an analysis of mass art.

Included in Carroll's collection, *Art in Three Dimensions*, is an essay on memorial art, "Art and Recollection." The essay opens with the following words:

Undoubtedly, as the discussions about how to commemorate the events of 9/11 have shown, we need to think seriously about memorial art—those statues whose often forgotten heroes molder in public parks and town squares everywhere. But perhaps that neglect is no more pronounced in any relevant domain of inquiry than it is in the philosophy of art, since memorial art is art expressly designed to perform cultural functions and there remains in modern aesthetics a strong tendency to withhold the title of art, properly so called, from works noteworthy for their social utility. Such art is, for a great many aestheticians, below their theoretical radar screens.

The culprit theory here is the aesthetic theory of art. (163)

Is Carroll here urging philosophers of art to reject not only the traditional hegemony of the aesthetic and the traditional hegemony of fine art but also the yet more fundamental hegemony of absorbed attention? I think not. Everything that he says in the essay takes for granted that works of memorial art are engaged as objects of absorbed attention. His argument concerning memorial art is the same as the argument that he makes concerning other forms of art, namely, that the aesthetic significance possessed by a work of the arts does not exhaust the significance it has for us when we engage it as an object of absorbed attention. That is the import of the sentence, "The culprit theory here is the aesthetic theory of art."<sup>14</sup>

The awakening that Arthur Danto experienced upon viewing Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* was an awakening to the fact that the works presented to us for viewing by the visual art world can no longer be thought of in purely visual terms; to identify what makes these objects works art, one has to employ the concept of *meaning*. Art, Danto concluded, is *embodied meaning*. Danto's awakening led him to join Berleant and Carroll in calling for a reconfiguration of the discipline of philosophy of art; the concept of meaning must replace that of the aesthetic as the central, organizing concept. Danto's awakening did not, however, lead him to look beyond the works

13. Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

14. In the final essay of *Art in Three Dimensions*, "Music, Mind, and Morality: Arousing the Body Politic" (written with Philip Alperson), Carroll does break with the hegemony of absorbed attention in the comments that he makes about group singing.

presented to us by the art world for our viewing to the works that we engage in other ways. He makes the quick remark, there may be “theories of art to account for the importance art is perceived to have in the common course of things.” To this he immediately adds, “I have nothing to say about this at all.”<sup>15</sup>

Recent developments in the art world have made the terminology employed in the discipline of philosophy of art vague and confusing. My way of coping with this situation will be to regiment the terminology. When I use the term “the arts” with no qualifying adjective, I will mean the traditional (fine) arts: poetry, prose fiction, drama, painting, sculpture, music, dance, and architecture. By “a work of the arts” I will then mean a work of one of those traditional (fine) arts. In the twentieth century a number of additional media have come to be called “arts,” prominent among them being still-photography, film, and ceramics; I will call these media “new arts”; and I will call a work of one of them, “a work of one of the new arts.” By the term “artwork” I will mean a work presented by some art institution for attentive viewing, listening, or reading.

Some artworks are works of one or another of the traditional arts, some are works of one or another of the new arts, and some are not works of any art, traditional or new; performance artworks would be an example. Conversely, whereas many works of the arts are artworks, many are not. Icons functioning as icons are not, nor are songs sung as an accompaniment to work; these are not presented by some art institution for attentive viewing or listening. When I speak of “art” rather than “the arts,” I will mean works of the traditional and new arts along with those artworks that are not works of any of the traditional or new arts. I will seldom use the honorific term “work of art”; the terms that I will be using are purely descriptive.

Some of the main ideas in this essay were first presented in public at a 2002 conference on “Art and Politics” organized by Noël Carroll and sponsored by the Institute for Research in the Humanities of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Early versions of the first several chapters of this essay were delivered as lectures at Boston University, Duke University, Hope College, St. Bonaventure University, the University of Virginia, Yale University, and at a salon in their home hosted by Roberta and Howard

15. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 47–8. Richard Shusterman, in *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), also calls for reconfiguring the field of philosophy of art. He practices what he preaches by devoting one chapter to a discussion of popular art in general and another to a discussion of rap music in particular.

Ahmanson; an early version of Chapter 13 was delivered at Baylor University, the University of Aberdeen, the University of Notre Dame, and Yale University. I thank the audiences at all of these venues for the stimulation of their responses. An early draft of the first half or so of the book was the topic of a discussion group at the University of Virginia; I thank especially William Hasselberger, Anna Kim, and Paul Nedilisky for their comments. And I thank Jonathan Anderson, Terence Cuneo, and two anonymous readers for Oxford University Press for their very helpful comments on the entire manuscript.

Last, I thank the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia for the financial support and the wonderful intellectual and physical environment they provided me for eight years as a Senior Research Fellow.

# *Contents*

Introduction

I

## **PART ONE. THE GRAND NARRATIVE OF ART IN THE MODERN WORLD**

- |   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. The Early Modern Revolution in the Arts            | 5  |
| 2. Why the Revolution?                                | 19 |
| 3. The Grand Narrative and the Grand Narrative Theses | 25 |
| 4. Wherein Lies the Worth of Disinterested Attention? | 34 |
| 5. Art, Religion, and the Grand Narrative             | 42 |

## **PART TWO. WHY THE GRAND NARRATIVE HAS TO GO**

- |  |    |
|--|----|
| 6. The Inapplicability of the Grand Narrative<br>to Recent Art | 55 |
| 7. Why the Grand Narrative Never Was Tenable                   | 67 |

## **PART THREE. A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT THE ARTS**

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 8. The Arts as Social Practices                 | 83  |
| 9. Meaning of Works of the Arts and of Artworks | 107 |

## **PART FOUR. MEMORIAL ART**

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 10. The Social Practices of Memorial Art             | 123 |
| 11. The Memorial Meaning of the Mural Art of Belfast | 152 |

## PART FIVE. ART FOR VENERATION

12. The Social Practices of Art for Veneration 167

## PART SIX. SOCIAL PROTEST ART

13. The Social Practices of Social Protest Art 195  
 14. The Social Protest Meaning of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 219  
 15. The Social Protest Meaning of the Graphic Art  
 of Käthe Kollwitz 244

## PART SEVEN. ART THAT ENHANCES

16. Work Songs: Social Practice and Meaning 255

PART EIGHT. THE ART-REFLEXIVE ART  
OF TODAY'S ART WORLD

17. The Social Practices of Art-Reflexive Art 273  
 18. Art-Reflexive Meaning in the Work of Sherrie Levine 294

PART NINE. EPILOGUE: GOOD WORKS  
AND JUST PRACTICES

19. What Happened to Beauty? 305  
 20. The Pursuit of Justice and the Social Practices of Art 322  
 Index 327



## Introduction

From Friday, March 15, through Sunday, March 17, 2002, the Vienna Philharmonic performed four concerts in New York City, three in Carnegie Hall and one on Sunday evening in St. Patrick's Cathedral. Two of the three Carnegie Hall concerts were enthusiastically reviewed in the Arts section of the *New York Times* of Tuesday, March 19, by one of the *Times* regulars, Allan Kozinn. The heading of his review was "Fresh Power in Familiar Works." In his review Kozinn wrote that Bernard Haitink, the conductor of the Carnegie Hall concerts,

...imposed order and an almost narrative sense of drama on [Anton Bruckner's Symphony No. 8] without taming it or smoothing its raw emotional edges. The Vienna players were in their element: the brass and winds produced the textured chords that are central to this orchestra's trademark sound, but it was the dusky, dynamically fluid string playing that gave the performance its soul... The Schubert Ninth, on the Saturday program, was appealing in a similarly visceral way. Its familiar themes were writ large and driven hard, yet there was also sufficient transparency in the orchestra's sound that details of the music's inner lines sometimes shone through and altered the perspective.

The review of the concert in St. Patrick's Cathedral took up three columns on the front page of the Arts section in the same edition of the *Times*, and then continued inside with three additional columns at the top of page 5, side by side with the two columns of Kozinn's review of the Carnegie Hall concerts. The cathedral concert was described as a "free program to honor the victims of Sept. 11." The review was headed, "A Somber Memorial from the Vienna Philharmonic," and was written by another of the *Times* regulars, James R. Oestreich. He wrote:

The memorial program anchored a basic sense of mourning in the Christian season of the Passion, centering on Haydn's unrelentingly somber "Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross." The evening opened with the solemn Adagio