

ARGUING ABOUT ART

Contemporary Philosophical Debates



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CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATES

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PREFACE

In producing this book, our aim has been to provide a collection of readings that is representative of ongoing debates in contemporary philosophical aesthetics, a collection which will enable students using it to engage with and join in those debates. Like many teachers of philosophy, we believe that the best, if not the only, way for students to learn philosophy, including philosophical aesthetics, is by *doing* philosophy, by engaging with and in philosophical dialogue and discussion. However, because most of the available anthologies designed for undergraduate courses in aesthetics are overwhelmingly historical in content, such an engagement can be hard to achieve. Many of the classic texts of aesthetics are extremely difficult, written in language that students new to the subject often find forbidding, and concerned with concepts which often appear to students—especially students specializing in subjects other than philosophy—far too abstract and embedded in difficult theoretical machinery to have any points of contact with everyday experience in the twentieth century. The historical nature of most anthologies can also make things difficult for the instructor who wishes to give a sense not only of the *history* of the philosophy of art, but also of the range of topics and issues that *contemporary* philosophers of art address and attempt to illuminate.

Our collection is not designed to substitute for collections of the classic texts of aesthetics, but rather to supplement them, so as to help an instructor overcome the difficulties described above. It contains eleven sections, each presenting a topic in contemporary aesthetics. As a glance at the Contents will show, it contains a very diverse selection of readings and topics, reflecting a wide variety of perspectives on philosophy and on art. Three factors have influenced our selection of topics. First, we have tried to produce a collection which is representative of ongoing discussion among contemporary aestheticians. As anyone familiar with the discipline knows, contemporary aesthetics exhibits no common agenda; there is no agreed-on set of questions or concerns which define the discipline.

We have attempted to reflect the diversity of interests and concerns pursued by aestheticians today in the topics we have selected. In doing so, we have included readings which focus on a variety of art forms: painting, film, photography, music, literature, and drama, as well as the natural environment. We believe that this variety will make the book usable and useful for a diverse audience, of the sort often found in courses on aesthetics: for students of literature and music, for example, as well as students of art, art history, and philosophy.

Clearly, some of the topics included are more venerable than others, and we do not suggest that they are all of equal importance. However, and this is the second factor which influenced our selection, we have found that these are topics which students take up and become involved with actively and readily. All of the readings here represent good examples of serious philosophical writing about the arts, which, we have found, work well in the classroom. They generate lively discussion and a feeling of genuine engagement with and in philosophical reflection about the arts. It is of course not easy to pick readings which will be accessible to every undergraduate reader and are also of philosophical and pedagogical value. However, we believe that this collection gets the balance about right.

Third, we have tried to include topics which make concrete many of the concerns raised in more abstract form by the classic texts of aesthetics, so that this collection can serve as an effective supplement to the latter. We begin with three topics that bear on originality and authenticity in the arts: Fakes and Forgeries (which in our experience works very well as the opening topic of a course), Colorizing Movies, and The "Authentic" Performance of Music. Next come two topics which raise issues central in the history of aesthetics: representation (here in the context of photography) and the nature of aesthetic appreciation (here in the context of the natural environment). We then move on to a cluster of four topics which focus on our emotional and intellectual engagement with art: Feelings and Fiction, The Pleasures of Tragedy, Sentimentality, and Musical Profundity. Finally, we turn to a pair of topics which bear on the institutions and the politics of aesthetics and the artworld: Feminism and Aesthetics and The Idea of the Museum. (We don't mean to suggest that the order in which the topics have been presented here is necessarily the best one. There are 39,916,799 other possible ways of ordering the topics, and we are sure that at least some of these will make as much sense as the one which we have chosen.)

The topics selected make it simple for an instructor to incorporate study of artworks into a course. For example, while reading and discussing the material on Colorizing Movies, a class might watch parts of both the original and the colorized version of Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. A visit to a museum or gallery may be useful when considering the material on The Idea of the Museum. Indeed, all the topics make it easy for the

teacher to include material which should ensure that the course does not become wholly detached from the sorts of objects of experience which the readings are about.

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As we have thought about and worked on this anthology, we have been greatly helped in many ways by a number of people. We would particularly like to thank Jay Bachrach, Curtis Brown, Allen Carlson, Sylvia Crisantes, David Dunham, Denis Dutton, Rick Flieger, Stan Godlovitch, Kathleen Higgins, Larry Kimmel, Flo Leibowitz, Jerrold Levinson, Doug McKenty, Marianne Neill, Ira Newman, Pat Powers, Jim Rather, Patty Rodney, Willis Salomon, Daniel Smith, Ann Spencer, Jay Thomson, Lee Thweatt, Dan Tures, Sue Weinberg, and our editor at McGraw-Hill, Cynthia Ward.

Finally, we would very much appreciate feedback about the book. Please let us know which parts of it have worked well for you, and pass on to us any suggestions for improvements. We would be particularly grateful for ideas about topics and readings which might be added in the future. Thanks!

Alex Neill

Aaron Ridley

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INTRODUCTION

The discussion of art is a human activity quite as natural as the creation of art.

—Lionel Trilling, "Criticism and Aesthetics"

For at least two and a half thousand years, people have been arguing about art. What is the nature of art? What kind of qualities can art have, and how? What is the nature of our *experience* of art? What qualities can our experience of art have, and how? Which of those qualities are the most rewarding, and why? These are all questions in the philosophy of art—or as it is often called, aesthetics. The term "aesthetics" was coined in 1750 by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, who meant by it "the science of sensory cognition." However, in the intervening years "aesthetics" has come to have a rather broader meaning. In effect, it has come to be more or less synonymous with "the philosophy of art." And that is how we shall use the term in this book; we shall regard "aesthetics" and "the philosophy of art" as interchangeable.

Disagreement about the nature and value of art, and about the nature and value of our experience of art, gives rise to philosophical debate. Someone dismisses as "sentimental slop" a novel which you love. Has one of you made a mistake? Your uncle insists on watching depressing movies. Is he insane? The market value of a "Rembrandt" plummets when it turns out that Rembrandt didn't paint it after all. Should it? Artworks tend to portray women in certain lights. How, and why? All of these questions raise issues of the kind which the philosophy of art is concerned with.

Some of the issues discussed in this book go back a very long time. The most ancient are the discussions about "The Pleasures of Tragedy" (how can people enjoy works of art which apparently also distress them?) and "Art and Truth" (is art valuable as a source of truth and knowledge?). These discussions, which began in the fourth century B.C., are still very much alive and well. A more recent issue is "Appreciation, Understanding, and Nature" (how does our appreciation and understanding of natural beauty compare with our appreciation and understanding of art?). This issue was one of the major concerns of eighteenth-century aesthetics and is as pressing today, in an age of increasing concern with the environment. But one of the most exciting things about the philosophy of art is that it continues to discover and to engage with new topics for debate. The controversies surrounding "Colorizing Movies," "The 'Authentic' Performance of Music," "Fakes and Forgeries," "Feminism and Aesthetics," and "The Idea of the Museum" are among the more recent in the philosophy of art, though they do tie in

to issues as old as the subject itself. Other arguments, such as those surrounding "Feelings and Fictions," "Photography and Representation," "Musical Profundity," and "Sentimentality," explore from a contemporary perspective issues which would have been recognized as central by the ancient Greeks. These twelve arguments thus represent some of the most fundamental and enduring as well as some of the most contemporary questions in the philosophy of art.

But are questions like these, questions about the nature and value of art, worth arguing about? After all, aren't they just a matter of subjective likes and dislikes, of purely personal opinion? That is itself one of the main questions in aesthetics. (It was one of the central concerns of both Hume and Kant in their writings on art, for example.) Since the very beginnings of philosophical reflection on art, people have wondered whether value judgments about works of art can be true or false, whether they are anything more than subjective statements of personal preference. We cannot hope to settle that question here. But even if it should turn out to be true that value judgments about works of art are purely subjective, that would not show that it was pointless to argue about issues in aesthetics. For one thing, not all talk about art is talk about the *value* of art. So even if *value judgments* about art do no more than express subjective preference, that does not mean that *all* talk about art is merely subjective. For another thing, confusion and mistakes can arise when we think about subjective matters just as they can when we think about objective matters. We can be mistaken about what we like and dislike, and about why we like or dislike it. One of the most important things we try to do in aesthetics is to resolve confusions and to identify mistakes in our thinking about art. Even if some of our talk about art does no more than express personal preference, then, arguing about art can help to clarify our understanding of important aspects of art and our experience of it. We believe that taking up and joining in with the philosophical arguments represented in this book will bear this claim out.

Many of these arguments, as is often the case in philosophy, may appear rather abstract. Indeed, some of them are; they *can* be understood and taken up at a highly theoretical level. However, all of the arguments will be better understood, and more usefully taken up, if the reader resists the temptation to treat them as purely theoretical. These arguments are about the human experience of various sorts of art. That is, they are about a kind of experience which almost everyone has had at some time. What this means is that they are arguments which will be understood best by and will be most helpful to the reader who insists on testing them against his or her own experience of art. We hope that the arguments here will encourage the reader to develop his or her own views about some of these issues. And the reader whose thinking is informed by his or her own ex-