Can art be defined?

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CERTAINTY is a marvelous thing. It not only provides a useful carapace against the onslaughts of doubt; it also does wonders for one's self-confidence. It is perhaps the one mental commodity that everyone, admirers and critics alike, will agree that the novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand (1905-1982) possessed in abundance. The attitude must be catching, for her disciples tend to be well endowed with certainty as well.

I thought about this when contemplating the title of Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi's book on Ayn Rand's theory of art: *What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand*. As the authors note, the title is "a deliberate inversion" of the title of Tolstoy's didactic manifesto *What Is Art?* Most readers have found Tolstoy's brief for subordinating art to religion and morality sufficiently, not to say crudely, apodictic. But at least he had the delicacy to cast it in the interrogative. The authors of *What Art Is* want none of that pusillanimous hesitation. Rand's speculations about art and literature may exhibit some "shortcomings in detail," they tell us. Nevertheless, they argue that "in its fundamental principles" her theory of art is "coherent, substantial, and valid, constituting a major contribution to the literature on the philosophy of art."

The prospect of an aesthetic theory that is not only "coherent" and "substantial" but also "valid" is pretty impressive, not to say intimidating. Of course, "valid" is an equivocal term. It can mean anything from "following necessarily" to merely "sound" or "compelling." The authors of *What Art Is* do not specify in what sense they use the word. Several things suggest that they presume a fairly high degree of rigor: their decision to italicize the word, the air of impatient certainty with which their discussion proceeds, and their emphasis on the importance of having "an objective definition" of art. Indeed, it

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seems that one of the chief things that attracted them to Rand's aesthetic theory was her willingness to provide such a definition. At a time when there is so much bogus art about, they were grateful to find someone who cut through the morass and could tell them—clearly, without any foolish shilly-shallying—that this here is art, while that over there just doesn't make the grade.

I WILL come back to the question of defining art in a moment. First, let me say a few words in general about What Art Is. The book was a long time coming: more than a decade, the authors tell us. Their researches over the years turned up a lot of art-world exotica, and they were loath to leave anything out.

What began as a series of magazine articles slowly accreted into a 500-page book, the main text of which is divided about equally between an exposition of Rand's theory of art and an attempt to apply its lessons to the bewildering world of twentieth-century art. The book proper concludes with a chapter on "public implications": government and corporate support of the arts (the message: Here Be Monsters), art and the law (free speech, pornography, etc.), and teaching the arts to children (the more traditional the better). This chapter, which I found to be the most persuasive part of the book, is followed by three brief appendices: a list of "some of the alleged forms of art invented since the beginning of the twentieth century" (Pop art, Op art, Body art, etc.), a list of art-world buzz words, and a few pages of examples of how the New York Times uses (and misuses) the term "arts" in its cultural coverage. The appendices are followed by just over 150 pages of endnotes that qualify, elaborate, or comment on issues raised in the main text. It's a rich, opinionated mélange of a book, full of notes, asides, and second thoughts, but positively steely in its pursuit of its main theme: laying down the law about what does, and what does not, qualify as art.

I suspect that this book had its genesis in two distinct impulses: admiration for the writings of Ayn Rand, on the one hand, and impatience with the contemporary art world, on the other. The impatience is eminently justified. As one looks around at much of what is adulated as art today, one shuttles between weariness, incredulity, and revulsion. Of course, there is plenty of good art being produced today. But the headlines are mostly reserved for work that is unutterably banal, downright pathological, or, just occasionally, both. Everyone will
have his own rogues' gallery and catalogue of horrors. Karen Finley, for example, earned her place in the annals of fatuousness by convincing the National Endowment for the Arts to shovel some money her way for an act that consisted of her prancing about naked, smeared with chocolate, while skirling about the evils of patriarchy. Or consider Matthew Barney, a hot young artist whose oeuvre consists of things like "Field Dressing (Orifill)," a video that depicts the artist "naked climbing up a pole and cables and applying dollops of Vaseline to his orifices." That description comes from Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic for the New York Times, who recently declared Barney "the most important American artist of his generation."

Well, you see what Andy Warhol meant when he said that "Art is what you can get away with." The authors of What Art Is provide a generous catalogue of such stuff and the commentary it has elicited. Readers familiar with the terrain will not encounter any new horrors: The authors have just paraded the usual suspects to make their point. But most readers are nevertheless in for some surprises. For in their effort to segregate the sheep of art from the goats of non- or bogus art, the authors have discovered many, many herds of goats.

It is quite breathtaking, in fact, to watch as our authors consign virtually all of modernist and postmodernist art to the limbo of non-art. They begin by promising to provide the "ordinary person's" common-sense view of art with "the theoretical justification it warrants." They end up by denying the status of art to virtually every avant-garde movement since the turn of the last century. Pop art, conceptual art, performance art have to go, as does abstract art in its entirety: "The very concept of abstract art," they tell us, "is invalid." Cézanne is not mentioned in this book. Neither is Georges Braque or Matisse. Picasso appears in one footnote. All of these artists took painting a long way toward abstraction, and it would be interesting to know whether our authors thought they qualified as artists. Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian fail to make the grade, as do Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and David Smith.

It's the same in other genres. Schoenberg "was inspired by a misguided desire to expand the expressive range of his art." Merce Cunningham "opened a Pandora's box that had yet to be closed." James Joyce and Samuel Beckett were obscurantist poseurs. And poor John Ashbery "is not a poet at all." Photography, they conclude, cannot really be considered a form of
art, nor can architecture. Our authors are correspondingly severe about the critics who championed any of this work. Meyer Schapiro is taken to task for his "spurious elitist perspective," Clement Greenberg for his "subjectivist elitism," Hilton Kramer for his allegiance to "formalist" values. Even Roger Kimball, it pains me to note, is rubbished for "counterfeit elitism," among other sins.

It is easy to sympathize with the exasperation that prompted *What Art Is*. We really do live at a time when *anything* can be hailed as a work of art. This has naturally led to a proliferation of pretentious and often pathological nonsense in the art world. But in their effort to introduce sanity to the discussion of art, our authors have vastly overshot the mark. Some of what they criticize deserves all the obloquy they heap on it. But in their pursuit of "an objective definition" of art they threaten to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

One problem is that art is not susceptible to the sort of definition they seek. Ayn Rand's detractors tend to view her philosophy as an adolescent form of Nietzscheanism—a sort of double adolescence, if you will—but she herself liked to trace her intellectual patrimony back to Aristotle. It is not surprising, then, that our authors frequently cite the *Poetics* in their exposition of Rand's theory of art. Even more pertinent, however, is Aristotle's observation, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that "the same exactness must not be expected in all departments of philosophy" and that "it is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness which the nature of the particular subject admits." Like many important things in life, art cannot usefully be defined. What matters is experience, not a priori prescription. Any true definition of art will have to be so general as to be vacuous.

So it is with Ayn Rand. Her definition of art as "a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgments" is hardly more helpful than her characterization of art as "the technology of the soul." Kant was right when he noted that

there can be no objective rule of taste which shall determine by means of concepts what is beautiful. For every judgment from this source is aesthetical, i.e., the feeling of the subject. To seek for a principle of taste which shall furnish, by means of definite concepts, a universal criterion of the beautiful is fruitless trouble, because what is sought is impossible and self-contradictory.
Our authors say a lot of lofty things about art. They tell us that for Ayn Rand "art is a unique means of integrating the physical and psychological aspects of human existence," that "art is the indispensable medium for the communication of a moral ideal," and so on. The problem is that lots of things that would qualify as art even on their restrictive definition conspicuously lack the Wagnerian density they desire.

Our authors tell us that "if a critical judgment is based on a mistaken notion of the nature of art, as distinct from that of other human endeavors, it necessarily forfeits its claim to respect or consideration." But in fact, persuasive critical judgments about art rely not upon possession of the correct "formal definition" of art but upon the exercise of taste. This is not to say that judgments about art are purely subjective, but it is to say that the common ground of taste can never be conceptually demonstrated. In Kant's telling formula, in judgments of taste "we woo the agreement" of others by appealing to a common sense we presuppose but cannot prove.

I DO not like Andy Warhol or Karen Finley or Robert Mapplethorpe or Marcel Duchamp any more than our authors do. But it is silly to deny that what they produced was art. It just doesn't get us anywhere. This is even true in the case of Duchamp, who intended his Dadaist pranks to undermine the very idea of art. It may be unfortunate that anything can be accorded the status of art in our society. It may token an important spiritual breakdown as well as a massive failure of nerve. But the real issue is not whether a given object or behavior qualifies as art but rather whether it should be regarded as good art. In other words, what we need is not definitional ostracism but informed and robust criticism.