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Book Review: John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?*

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WHAT GOOD ARE THE ARTS? By John Carey, Faber and Faber, London: 2005, pp. xii + 286

John Carey's book is a marvelous read. It is beautifully written, the argument is lucid, it assembles some fascinating evidence and calls for debate on one of the few social topics on which practitioners and philosophical thinkers tend to speak the same language. I learned much from the book; I also disagreed with quite a bit of it. But Carey has provided such a useful service that criticism must be continuing the argument, not trying to undermine it.

Carey means to debunk several myths, including the idea that there is some essence or set of criteria that identifies what is art. He argues that attempts to identify a sub-set of 'genuine' artworks are premised on the assertion that one person's feelings are more valuable than another's. Carey dismisses this, arguing we cannot know another person's feelings and that in any case, ranking feelings in terms of their value is arbitrary: ultimately, just a matter of how you feel. Art, Carey thinks, is just what the individual thinks to be art (question: do people—including ordinary members of the public looking at an exhibition—think that judging artworks is judging people's feelings? Carey does not consider ontology of art; in fact, the opening of the book implies that realism here—and in ethics—would have to be a 'religious' matter).

If Carey is right, we cannot rank art at all as art, which I find hard to square with our ideas and practices of artistic growth and development. For example, I know a composer who moved from writing pleasant, derivative tunes to developing an independent and quite revolutionary voice. I can describe this change best in terms that are neither purely factual nor simple reflection of my own feelings: I can best discuss his growth and improvement as a creative artist within the terms of the art of music. Carey would presumably try to reduce the musicology here, like the artworks themselves, to fact or to taste. He is a nominalist about art: there are no universals, only individual artworks made so by individuals' reactions and decisions. He does not offer a theoretical argument: true nominalist, he simply says without criticism 'this is what has happened: people now call "art" whatever they feel like.' He does not take a position on whether someone can describe something as art without first having a concept or idea of art. He might say that the concept of art too is personal—which may be true in the sense that it is personal to me, my concept, but hardly in the sense that its content is entirely personal to me. We hold the concepts we do because of our beliefs about the truth, not because we feel like holding these concepts. Anyone who says they 'just feel like' holding a certain concept of art, or of anything else, isn't accurately and fully describing what they do when they think conceptually.

Carey is strongly empiricist (p. 174: 'we cannot talk of truth and falsehood except where proof is available . . .'). He calls often—and often rightly—for evidence, tests, surveys before we can make claims about what 'people' think about art. But individuals are rarely the (sole) authorities for their own responses. We can't settle complex issues just by piling up testimonial evidence. What matters too is the thinking and reasons behind people's testimonies—the meaning of this evidence—and this calls for careful, including non-empirical, analysis. Carey may well have demonstrated that we lack today a theory of art that is popularly acceptable, yet people (me, for one) may still react as if we do have this theory, or at least could have. Perhaps a good theory of art is still to be sought; perhaps it exists elsewhere

than in the enlightenment and post-enlightenment aestheticians Carey reviews. Ch. 2 explores recent views that fashion, gardening and other familiar activities are art; or rather, that the category of art should be dropped in favour of a broader class of activities we find special, enthralling, encouraging. Since all such activities must serve our evolutionary needs, football or fashion may be more valuable than Poussins or symphonies. But humans have other than evolutionary needs—reason means we can transform or extend our evolutionary inheritance from mere survival into an interest in the potentially infinite questions of knowledge, action and appreciation. Art that satisfies these more cerebral needs can also benefit the activities that connect us more directly with survival: thus gardening and fashion may benefit from the content of traditional arts as well as explain the roots of these arts. Perhaps it is the interplay between developed art and natural practices that makes gardening more than subsistence, fashion more than attracting a mate, football more than hunting raids. If so, the high-versus-popular-art debate does not reflect the reality, whether one takes Carey's position within that debate or not.

A major feature of Carey's book is advocacy for participatory, hands-on art defined against power-house, showcase art. But these can co-exist, as they surely must: without the Jessye Normans and Yehudi Menuhins the profile of art, standards of art teaching, crafting of instruments to the highest level, ability and capacity of people to articulate the importance of art within prisons and other deprived communities, would all suffer. What happens if a prisoner encouraged to express through art his need for social inclusion turns out to be the next Placido Domingo? We then have 'power-house', quality art, and he now needs and deserves training, work, colleagues, professional advice, opportunities, variety of repertoire all of the highest caliber. It is naïve to think there would be people to inspire prisoners to put on Macbeth—or would be Macbeth in 2005—were there not drama schools, a culture of theatre, recognition and remuneration for writers and actors, a range of opportunities at different levels.

Carey questions the idea that art makes us better people. His discussion here is original and his case that participatory art helps and improves people is strong. But I think the link between quality art and goodness deserves more attention. Good philosophical work on creativity, imagination and choice is available, as well as the cant Carey rightly dismisses. Also, the art/religion connection, which Carey only touches on, deserves investigation. Anyone with a knowledge or history of religious experience, anyone even moved often to prayer, takes part in an experience that is creative, appreciative and serious, and that means it includes aesthetic experience. It is absurd to think subscribing to the local rep makes you a better person. But it can help tutor emotion in busy people and sensitise us to deeper thinking on the world and our contemporary inadequacies; the psychological and social analysis of why it does not inevitably do so is but one half of the matter.

Part II argues that alone of the arts literature can coherently and intelligently criticise itself. This is complicated: only literature can make criticism (that is itself literature) of literature, but surely only music can make criticism (that is itself music) of music. There are examples a-plenty of (intentionally) anti-music music, antipainting painting etc. Carey thinks (p. 177) that literature is the only art that can criticise anything, at all. This is because of its relation to reasoning. It's true that only persons can argue, and argument is using words, but what is special about literature is that it makes art out of argument's tools—words—not that it is closer to reason. Literature seems no closer (whatever that means) to reason than dance which uses

the human medium of argument—the body—to make art, or music which uses its very freedom from argument to express structure and order more directly. Carey also argues only literature can moralise, which I find simply wrong: what about the *Pieta*? Shostakovich's symphonies? Mime?

Carey believes all literature has an indistinctness which empowers the reader to exercise imagination. He reminds us we may well disagree with him here, but that this is expected since his thesis is the importance of subjective judgement and personal response. This is unconvincing (if you accept my view, you prove my thesis; if you reject it, you prove my thesis). In fact, since Carey's thesis on literature depends on his own interpretation of literary examples, if we do not agree with these interpretations, we have been given little reason to accept the thesis. His claims for literature over the other arts can be hard to credit: musicians and others would probably be puzzled about the allegedly unique ways in which we can make literature our own and use it imaginatively. I also find heavy-handed the argument that art makes no truth-claims which is why very different conflicting artworks can co-exist while conflicting scientific theories cannot. Perhaps instead art's special relation to truth is expressive: an infinity of different expressions of truth can evidently co-exist though an infinity of different (scientific) propositions about truth cannot. This book deeply interested me, particularly in its assembly of recent studies from different fields. It also left me wishing that distinctions between performance art and other art, writing and literature, words and music and so on had been teased out in Part II which makes some very bold claims. My strongest response by far is conviction that Carey is right about participatory art, but disappointment that with some cheap shots at Covent Garden he has dismissed what quality art means and what it might do for real people and communities.

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