

The Visual Arts in *What Art Is*

By Joan Mitchell Blumenthal

As the twentieth century progressed, those who believed that its art could not become more perverse or self-defeating were proved wrong by every charlatan or madman who claimed to be making or responding to art. If anything could be a remedy for the current tragic state of the arts, it would be the probing, insightful, and eminently readable analysis of the problem presented by Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi.

Understanding that the advancing demise of the arts stems from a vacuum in the philosophical, creative, and critical spheres, the authors begin with a study of esthetic theory, looking into the question of what art has been considered to be historically, and how the task of defining art has been progressively abandoned in this century. At every step, they have been careful to elucidate the opinions of those thinkers whose work has merit, along with an adequate sampling of those whose thoughts are shown to be clearly incorrect and contradictory.

Defining What Art Is

They orient much of their discussion around the definition and theories of Ayn Rand, not because she left an exhaustive study of the arts, nor even one that is faultless and totally consistent, but because her definition and many of her explanations are philosophically and psychologically fundamental, and can be extended—as the authors do throughout the book—to further illuminate the nature and spiritual function of art.

After discussing the nature of definitions in general, Torres and Kamhi subject Rand's definition, "Art is the selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value judgments" (26), to detailed scrutiny (chapter 6). They explain that Rand's definition does not contain a statement of the purpose of art, because art is distinct from other man-made objects in that it performs an exclusively psychological or psycho-epistemological function (105). The authors quote Rand on this point:

"Man's profound need of art lies in the fact that his cognitive faculty is conceptual, i.e., that he acquires [and retains] knowledge by means of abstractions, and needs the power to bring his widest metaphysical abstractions into his immediate perceptual awareness. Art fulfills this need: by means of selective re-creation, it concretizes man's fundamental view of himself and of existence" (60).

Whatever the variety of purposes individual artists may have, that, says Rand, is the ultimate purpose of art.

Torres and Kamhi test the definition and find that it satisfies the objective criteria required for a proper definition: it possesses a valid *genus* and *differentia*. The *genus* conveys information about the larger class to which art works belong, subsuming a variety of man-made objects and activities, including many that are not works of art, such as model ships, celebrity impersonations, and, especially relevant for the visual arts, illustrations. The *differentia* consists of the creator's "metaphysical value judgments," those basic values that the individual considers most important in life. The definition is broad: it includes all instances that could reasonably be called art and excludes only those works whose status as art is disputed. The definition is essential: it identifies a fundamental attribute of all authentic art and allows for the creative diversity we see throughout the long history of art before the modernist movement. But is it a circular definition, defining "art" in terms of "artists?" Torres and Kamhi say it is not: one could substitute "maker" for "artist" without materially changing the meaning (106).

The authors point out that the *genus* of Rand's definition, "the selective re-creation of reality," is not similar to Plato's derogatory notion of art as "slavish imitation," but is similar to Aristotle's concept of "*mimesis* (imitation)," which is "selective" and "transforming," such that "the likeness produced conveys through its particular appearance a more general (universal) significance" (28). Rand's example of the psycho-epistemological procedure of artistic creation appears in her discussion of the process involved in creating Sinclair Lewis's fictional, eponymous character, Babbitt (28). Such a process would, perhaps, be grasped more easily in an example from the visual arts—where a subject is materially recreated—but Rand's understanding of the specific methods of the other arts was limited as it was not in the case of literature. It is natural that she would choose to illustrate the process in the field she knew best.

Applying the Definition

As the investigation continues, and the full import of Rand's definition becomes clear, Torres and Kamhi use it as the standard against which to measure artistic creations and esthetic criticism. They show how it applies to all the fine arts and explain why it applies only to the fine arts: they rule out photography (chapter 9), architecture (chapter 10), arts and crafts (chapter 11), and other utilitarian objects.

Concerning the visual arts, Rand's theory, briefly stated, is that conceptual meaning is projected through the

integration of perceptible forms. In paintings, drawings, and prints, it is the creation of a unified image on a two-dimensional surface that allows us to apprehend meaning; in sculpture, it is the re-creation of reality by means of three-dimensional form that embodies the ideational content (53–54, 66). The authors mention Rand's occasional confusion of subject with content in the visual arts—seen, for example, in the case of her criticism of Vermeer (53)—but they use Rand's definition at every step, particularly to make it clear that if no entities are re-created, no meaning is possible. This rules out any painting or sculpture containing no recognizable subject matter, as is the case with the early non-objective painters and most of the postmodernists (133–72, 262–73).

Throughout *What Art Is*, Torres and Kamhi do a brilliant job of driving home this point, which cannot be stated too often: If a work has no conceptual meaning, it is not art, no matter how pleasing it may be as decoration. The implication for painting and sculpture is that much of what has been called art in the twentieth century should be removed from that category. If it made only that point, this book would be of inestimable value.

“Modern Art”

In a hair-raising but carefully selected and excellently substantiated account, the authors survey the continuing disintegration of painting and sculpture from the early twentieth century (133–46) through the postmodern period (262–82). They describe the work of such influential “pioneers” as Malevich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian as best it can be described. They discuss the spurious, subjective, and often overtly mystical theories that were published by way of explanation of what was happening on the canvases. From their discussion of the appearance of modernist art and what has been written about it, it is clear that most of the explanations have been more fanciful than the works they purport to explain.

There is no doubt that the creators of nonobjective art would have found acceptance more difficult were it not for the art historians, curators, estheticians and critics. Almost without exception, the theorists have attempted to manufacture something of substance to create a serious aura of meaning and value around the work, hoping to disguise the fact that what they are talking about is, essentially, meaningless arrangements of clay and stone, smears of paint on canvas, or junk from the streets. However absurd the notions the theorists put forth, they have helped to silence, or at least mute, the objections of a public that does not like nonrepresentational work. Although Torres and Kamhi have been able to document the degree of the public's actual distaste (164–68, 172–79), the art world, though small in number, is apparently adept at intellectual intimidation.

Significantly, the authors note that certain metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological statements appeared with modernist painting from its inception. Quoting directly from the artists themselves or from their apologists, they cite negative views about the reality of physical existence, claims about the invalidity of the human mode of perception and conception, and blatant assertions about the inevitability of the mind-body dichotomy (133–46). Subjectivism is the rule, intuition is applauded, and collectivism, anti-capitalism, mysticism, nihilism, and hostility toward material existence dominate the talk about modern art.

The modernist movement was institutionalized and became “academically correct” by the mid-twentieth century. Prestigious intellectuals who fostered it included Marxist art historian Meyer Shapiro and critic Clement Greenberg (146–51). However much they disagreed with each other and were inconsistent in their own views—one looking forward to the proletarian revolution and the other to the ideal of pictorial flatness—they agreed that it took special “sensitivity” to understand the new art. Certainly the paintings of Malevich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian, among others, are inherently elitist because their supposed meaning is not accessible to the normal, intelligent viewer. With the critics on the scene, it became explicitly elitist, revealing the psychological motive that moves the modern-art world. Because its members believe they must demonstrate their superior understanding, artists, critics, patrons, and those who aspire to become part of the art world are afraid to admit that “the emperor has no clothes.”

Postmodernism: Plus Ça Change

Although the art of the postwar period may look different from the work of the pioneering modernists, nothing of fundamental significance changed.

From the middle to the end of the century, the painters produced one short-lived style after another. Some works of the second half of the twentieth century are seemingly more readily understood because they have recognizable subject matter, but in the respects that count, the postmodernists do not differ from the pioneers of the *avant garde*; and, similarly, the theorists continue to manufacture torrents of deliberately esoteric verbiage to further the illegitimate goals of modernism.

It could not have been easy for the authors to choose among the daunting array of postmodern tendencies—from the garish drips and vacuous color fields of the Abstract Expressionists, such as Pollock, Rothko, Newman, and de Kooning (151–68), through the chaos of Pop Art, including the work of

Rauschenberg, Johns, Lichtenstein, and Warhol (265–70). In this group we find juxtaposed images cut from publications (collage), and paintings of anything banal, from comic strips to tubes of toothpaste. The mass media images of this school are often presented by means of mechanical processes and in overblown sizes, which does nothing to suggest that they are art. They fail to meet the criteria of art, as expressed in Rand's definition, because, for all the pretentious writing about them by critic Arthur Danto (269) and art historian Leo Steinberg, etc., and in spite of their recognizable subject matter, Pop Art images are not created to project any metaphysical value judgments.

So-called Conceptual Art (270–73) is currently holding center stage in the art world. Torres and Kamhi introduce the subject by saying: "No other aspect of postmodernism has more profoundly or pervasively undermined the practice of the visual arts in the years since the early 1960s than the notion of the so-called *conceptual art*" (270–71). Because Conceptual Art is difficult to define, Torres and Kamhi consult the *Oxford Dictionary of Art* (1988). The term refers to "various forms of art in which the idea for a work is considered more important than the finished product, if any" (271). As the meaning is supposed to be thoughts and ideas, words—our means of expressing thoughts—often play a large part. Tom Wolfe's title *The Painted Word* was probably inspired in part by the fact that in Conceptual Art we often see painted or sculpted words or sentences. Of course, we may also see other things—for example, the wavy lines randomly disposed in Sol LeWitt's gigantic recent painting, which cannot be ignored as one enters the front door of Christie's auction house in New York. In Conceptual Art, the forms, their arrangement, and their appearance do not matter. The works need not even exist outside the mind of the creator. Torres and Kamhi quote LeWitt who says, among other questionable things, that even if a work shows no idea that is made visual, it is still a work of art (271). The authors point out the confusions and misconceptions that exist on many levels in the theories of Conceptual Art. They remind us, for example, that art is supposed to focus the viewer's attention on the work's concrete representations so that the abstract content may be understood (272).

One of the serious questions confronting the discerning reader is whether or not the artists are entirely sane. Does nonrepresentational art and representational anti-art look the way it does because the artists have psychotic disturbances of thought and vision, or are they merely playing a con game? The authors point to considerable scientific opinion that much so-called art is the result of psychosis, particularly schizophrenia (129–30, 143–46). Experience tells me that while that is true of some non-objective painters, many more are just plain fakers. And after a century of being lauded by critics, art historians, and dealers, these would-be artists believe they can get away with it.

Conclusion

I have one minor reservation concerning an example used in the book: Torres and Kamhi say that Harriet Frishmuth's nude sculpture *The Vine* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art "compares favorably with any sculpture from classical antiquity" (69). I think that if one were to place it alongside a classical work of genius, such as *The Belvedere Torso* in the Vatican Museum, one could not support their assessment.

A more serious disagreement with the authors of this extraordinary book is their use of the term "abstract" art. Although this is certainly the most common term for a type of twentieth-century non-art painting, I believe the word should be "nonrepresentational" or "nonobjective" or even "non-figurative," when appropriate. In fact, all true painting and sculpture is abstract: the creators, in "re-creating reality," must abstract aspects of the subject(s) from experience of physical existence. The authors may be aware of the problem with the word "abstract" (133, 309–10), but it is, I believe, mistaken where no process of abstraction has been performed.

Still, like two voices of reason singing in the wilderness, Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi have made an invaluable contribution to the potential passing of the twentieth century's anti-art. Perhaps this book will reach the minds of some of those who influence artistic affairs. In any case, we owe the authors an enormous debt of gratitude because the artist needs—and we all need—concretized visions of truly human values.