

Lambert Zuidervaart

Art in Public: Politics, Economics and a Democratic Culture.

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The central aim of Lambert Zuidervaart's *Art in Public* can be stated in a phrase: to defend direct state subsidies for non-profit arts organizations. Further, the philosophical and political contexts of Zuidervaart's policy prescription are crystal clear. The arts, he argues, play the indispensable role of making needs of general significance communicable in a value-pluralistic society. In such a society, general significance always requires establishing: therefore the state, insofar as it is always the context and often the engine of justice in a pluralistic society, has a direct obligation to make participation in the arts universally available to those under its jurisdiction.

The compactness of its thesis notwithstanding, *Art in Public* has many moving parts, all informed by Zuidervaart's command of democratic theories of culture and politics and his wide knowledge and experience of the theory and practice of non-profit cultural institutions. At bottom, however, Zuidervaart deploys three streams of argument and experience to establish his thesis: (a) a Habermasian account of the normative commitments and deficits of developed capitalist democracies that are differentiated into the three systems (and corresponding spheres of value) of state (the sphere of justice), economy (the sphere of resourcefulness), and culture (which Zuidervaart treats as essentially a system of publicity, hence, as the sphere of authenticity and expressiveness); (b) an Adornian account of art as the disclosure of neglected meanings that press recognitive justice claims of general significance; and (c) his own expertise about, and personal experience with, the inner workings of the contemporary non-profit world of art. We witness these three streams converge in summary statements such as this: 'Art in public is a culturally mediated and societally constructed sociocultural good whose imaginative disclosure draws nuanced attention to issues and interests of public concern. It can do so because of its role in civil society, especially at the interfaces of civil society with political and economic systems ... Organizations fostering art in public need government protection and support not only because political and economic systems threaten civil society but also because these systems require a robust civil society in order to function properly' (170). In this spirit, *Art in Public* develops a theoretical and practical account of the organizational structures required to secure the contributions the arts make to the open-ended democratization of social life. Arthur Danto once called Nelson Goodman our foremost philosophical art dealer; Zuidervaart bids to become our leading philosopher of art's institutionalization.

Given the way Zuidervaart combines social scientific and philosophical resources with an eye to enhancing the contribution of arts organizations to the democratization of social life, we should understand *Art in Public* as a *critical theory of art's institutionalization*. This aligns his project with the critical theory of art elaborated in the philosophy of Adorno (our understanding of which has been enriched by Zuidervaart's own previous work). But deep questions arise where Zuidervaart seeks to tether Adorno's gimlet eye for the prospects for human emancipation in developed capitalist democracies to the Habermasian account of how the institutions of

modern society 'secure' freedom. Zuidervaart is keenly aware of the dangers to art's critical function posed by any establishmentarian warrant. In fact, his discussions of the deleterious consequences of art's subordination to economic imperatives (hypercommercialization) and bureaucratic imperatives (performance fetishism) is one of the most enlightening parts of *Art in Public*. However, because he frames those dangers in terms of a largely Habermasian account of the threat to art's critical function posed specifically by the hegemony of other systems and value spheres, Zuidervaart does not alleviate the concern that the danger to art's critical authority arises from the dynamics of institutionalization as such. Any philosophy that arrogates to art the authority to disclose meanings that get broken off in the process of the rationalization and bureaucratization of modern life—meanings that arise, in short, from social injury—but then seeks to establish the grounds for securing such authority institutionally ought at least to be ambivalent about the very idea of institutional authority. But precisely where Zuidervaart should be ambivalent, he becomes undialectical. Nowhere is this clearer than in his effort to digest the Adornian account of the autonomy of art in his own critical theory of art's institutionalization.

Zuidervaart advocates the view that art is autonomous, in the sense that its legitimacy and worth cannot be reduced to nonartistic matters. However, he qualifies his advocacy by denying that it is 'the artwork as such, or the artist's talent and experience, or some other single constituent that secures such legitimacy and worth, but rather the entire dynamic complex of constituents, as mediated by appropriate organizations' (223). One need not take on board all of Adorno's commitments to a stronger conception of artistic autonomy than this to see that Zuidervaart's conception of 'appropriate organization' is already too tinged with the language of grant-writing and bureaucracy to allow for the thought that art's autonomy—its legitimacy and worthiness to be evaluated independently of instrumental considerations—derives from its capacity to press authoritatively the significance of claims for which there are no norms of 'appropriateness.' No doubt art's 'outlaw' advocacy is of general social and political significance, but such significance is imperiled unless art is judged with no *immediate* regard for its general significance. Judged, as it has traditionally been put, aesthetically. But Zuidervaart flattens out this dialectic when, in taking up Adorno's well-known characterization of the inner ambivalence of modern art as 'the social antithesis of society,' he says this formula should not be taken to signify art's freedom to separate itself from the rest of society. In some sense yes, but as with personal autonomy, art's autonomy must be regarded also as, so to speak, a 'right of exit' from society despite that it can be exercised only within, perhaps even encouraged and recognized only by, the society in question. That art is currently in the stage of wholesale global institutionalization makes Zuidervaart's account of its relation to justice and democracy invaluable. For the same reason, though, one more twist to the dialectic of art's autonomy than Zuidervaart gives is required for art's contribution to the critique of institutions to be validated as well.

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