

Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art.* Oxford University Press 2015. 320 pp. \$50.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198747758).

Future historians who look back upon thinking about art and aesthetic phenomena over the past three centuries will see a recurring struggle to remedy the mischief caused by theorizing from too small samples. A landmark in this struggle will be Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Art Rethought*. In company with many recent philosophers, Wolterstorff speaks for the non-aesthetic powers of works of music, literature, architecture, and the other arts. To build on his peers' contributions, he first tells a fascinating and persuasive story about the source of our small-sample mindset, and then frames the non-aesthetic powers of works in the arts as wired into social practices (full disclosure: I developed similar ideas in *Beyond Art*). Lamenting that philosophers have ignored 'kissing, touching, and crying as ways of engaging art' (3), he proposes to take non-aesthetic modes of artistic engagement seriously by seeing them as responsive to art's social meanings.

Wolterstorff's rethinking unfolds in three movements, each comprising a number of pleasingly compact chapters. The first six chapters synthesize historical themes from work of P.O. Kristeller, M.H. Abrams, Hans Belting, and James Simpson. What we now recognize as the fine arts came to be grouped together by the mid-eighteenth century in the light of a consensus about art's aesthetic aim, or telos, to win its autonomy from social reality. Specifically, the arts achieved their full potential when art works came to be engaged as objects of disinterested, hence rapt, attention. Since disinterested attention is attention on an item for its own sake, the arts achieve their full potential when art appreciation bypasses instrumentality and routine social transactions. Wolterstorff tells the familiar story with great verve, but adds two nice twists. Whereas Kristeller traced the formation of the modern system of the arts to institutional and economic factors (e.g. the switch to the liberal arts curriculum and the expansion of the leisured classes), Wolterstorff seconds Simpson's hypothesis that the ideology of disinterest was a defensive move in response to furious iconoclasm debates in European religious communities: images acquire immunity from charges of idolatry when moved from sacred to secular space and set up for disinterested contemplation. Ironically, the second twist is that art, once viewed as socially transcendent, could then substitute for the divine that was going missing in secularizing cultures.

Philosophers will want to slow down for the second movement and scrutinize the details of the book's theoretical core. Chapter 7 dismantles the conception of the arts that is our eighteenth-century inheritance. The conception implies three iffy claims. Wolterstorff gives counterexamples to the claim that disinterested attention always leads to rapt engagement. Responding to the claim that the arts realized their potential as we came to engage art works disinterestedly, he replies that older forms of engagement are alive and well. Finally, he rejects the claim that disinterested attention to art work separates the arts from the causal instrumentality of practical affairs. Something made to engage disinterested attention might also serve some other purpose. Claims for art's radical social otherness are therefore unwarranted.

The lesson is that we should ‘expand our perspective and take note not just of aesthetic attention as a way of engaging works of the arts but also of the many other ways in which art enters into the fabric of human life’ (vii). Since an expanded framework requires some conceptual infrastructure, Wolterstorff proposes in chapter 8 that the arts realize their full potential as social practices (not by transcending them!). With one technical proviso, he takes on board Alasdair MacIntyre’s model of a social practice as,

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (*After Virtue*, 187).

Chapter 9 supplements the theory of social practices with a theory of social-practice meaning. An item’s social-practice meaning is principally the function it performs when it is engaged by participants of a social practice. Wolterstorff’s careful and lucid discussion of how social-practice meaning differs from maker-meaning, act-meaning, and communicative act meaning is, by itself, worth the price of the book.

Technically-minded philosophers will find Wolterstorff’s three central chapters to be a bit of a tease. Why MacIntyre on practices? Why not David Lewis updated by Cristina Bicchieri? And how about filling in some details? For example, Wolterstorff assumes that when ϕ ing is a social act, there is some non-social act that counts as ϕ ing, but he leaves the counting as relation unexamined. Is the view a shadow of John Searle’s construction of social reality? And surely the discussion of social meaning would be enriched by Sally Haslanger’s *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*? Any book could be longer and include more, of course. Here Wolterstorff’s goal is to provide just enough theory to open up an expanded perspective on the arts. That his theoretical framework is ‘highly schematic’ (85) and perhaps sketchy only means that we ought to accept it as an invitation to further work.

Continuing the musical analogy, the third movement is something like a rondo—brisk, vernacular, and full of joyous appreciation. Skeptics of aesthetic theories of art are spurred on by non-aesthetic art, and Wolterstorff does devote interesting chapters to Duchamp’s *Fountain* and Sherrie Levine’s app-art practice. However, he is most moved, and most moving, when it comes to four case studies of genres that were not traditionally understood as inducing disinterested attention—memorials, religious icons, protest art, and work songs.

In case it is not already obvious, this is a personal book, whose author permits himself to be affronted by philosophy’s sneering reception of these genres. He writes that there is ‘something singularly obtuse and inhumane about Hegel’s implicit dismissal of memorial art on the ground that art

should never be “put to use” (124). What follows is a deep and heartfelt appreciation of memorials. Countering the standard line that memorials serve as repositories of collective memory, Wolterstorff argues instead that in making and using memorials we pay honour to persons or events, and he analyzes the act of honouring as a social act wherein certain gestures come to count as having meaning. The ideas are applied in a chapter detailing memorial street art in Belfast. In a return to the question of iconoclasm, a chapter on religious icons contends that the iconoclasts shared with iconophiles a mistaken assumption, without which their debate fizzles, namely that there is a kind of equivalence between what a person does with an icon and what they do with the figure for whom the icon stands. Recall that when ϕ ing is a social act, there is some non-social act that counts as ϕ ing: in some religious traditions, kissing the icon counts as venerating the holy person. A pair of chapters on protest art enumerate the elements of successful social protests and then show how art can be part of what energizes, expresses, and activates protest against injustice. Conceding that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* may not be great literature, aesthetically speaking, Wolterstorff champions its effectiveness as vehicle for abolitionism, just as he insightfully gauges the power of Käthe Kollwitz’s prints and drawings to evoke from us the cry ‘this must not be!’ Finally, a beautifully conceived chapter on work songs makes plain how singing can transform work into something new—into sung work. When singing fits the work, it makes the work go better and brings workers together in a common project that offers the prospects of shared pleasure.

A methodological coda... The dialectical structure of the book must be abductive. A theory of art should explain facts about the role of art in the fabric of human life. An aesthetic theory of art cannot explain these facts, for it is designed to downplay them. A theory that takes art practices to be social practices is correct because it explains the facts that need explaining. As often happens with abductive arguments in philosophy, the real insight comes from making out what facts need to be explained. *Art Rethought* is a huge stride in that direction. True, the theoretical framework needs filling in. New questions are raised, too. What about the downside—pornography, propaganda, hate art, and art that peddles false consolation? And why stop with art? How much is to be gained by leaning on the fact that work songs and protest novels happen to belong to the same forms as fine art music and literary writing? The core insights of the book apply to many video games, for example, even if video games are not an art form. While we are at it, why not reject the narrow conception of the aesthetic and repatriate aesthetic responses into social reality? The best books give us questions that demand answers.

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