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But Is It Art?: An Introduction To Art Theory



Synopsis

From Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes to provocative dung-splattered madonnas, in today's art world many strange, even shocking, things are put on display. This often leads exasperated viewers to exclaim--is this really art? In this invaluable primer on aesthetics, Freeland explains why innovation and controversy are so highly valued in art, weaving together philosophy and art theory with many engrossing examples. Writing clearly and perceptively, she explores the cultural meanings of art in different contexts, and highlights the continuities of tradition that stretch from modern, often sensational, works back to the ancient halls of the Parthenon, to the medieval cathedral of Chartres, and to African nkisi nkondi fetish statues. She explores the difficulties of interpretation, examines recent scientific research into the ways the brain perceives art, and looks to the still-emerging worlds of art on the web, video art, art museum CD-ROMS, and much more. In addition, Freeland guides us through the various theorists of art, from Aristotle and Kant to Baudrillard. Lastly, throughout this nuanced account of theories, artists, and works, Freeland provides us with a rich understanding of how cultural significance is captured in a physical medium, and why challenging our perceptions is, and always has been, central to the whole endeavor. It is instructive to recall that Henri Matisse himself was originally derided as a "wild beast." To horrified critics, his bold colors and distorted forms were outrageous. A century later, what was once shocking is now considered beautiful. And that, writes Freeland, is art.

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Customer Reviews

Is there a more confusing or controversial area of understanding in today's society than determining

whether a piece of work is 'art' or 'trash'. This book gives a scholarly, yet eminently readable and enjoyable description of how the question, 'but is it art', can be approached and understood. Beginning with Neanderthal renderings and ending in the digital arena - the changing creative environments and philosophical drivers are explained clearly and compellingly. The authors appropriately timed use of wit keeps one happily reading in an area that could easily get dry and intellectually elitist. I now finally feel that I have some tools to evaluate 'art' for myself.

The author has tackled an immense subject and skims the surface by discussing some of the many different theories of art. Her desire to keep the discussion straightforward and brief results in sometimes heavy-handed simplification (to the point of dumbing down) the ideas she discusses, but the book is still a useful introduction to thinking about art. I found myself disappointed with the book in a number of ways, and I'll discuss a couple of them here. First, the author has discussed theory by means of examples, and her choices of artists like Goya and Bacon work well, but some of her other choices (Bill Viola, for example) give the book a somewhat dated feel. A second, more significant disappointment, is the author's discussion of museums. A number of her comments seem uninformed and (in one case regarding the Getty) even snarky. The tone of her writing undermines her discussion of important questions such as how museums should balance the goal of showing worthwhile works with the goal of showing works by a representative group of artists. There is a lot of real-world compromise required to get lenders and donors on board so that exhibitions happen, and lenders, donors and exhibition organizers are, in fact, wrestling with these issues daily. Overall, the book is a good introduction to a number of theories about art, and perhaps it would work as one of the texts to be used in a high school or college survey class. However, anyone with a serious interest in art will be left wanting something more satisfying on a number of levels.

This was a very interesting book and a good read. However, if you are looking for a primer on art theory, then you need look elsewhere. This gives some insight into the general art theories of the past and today but it isn't organized like a textbook. Instead it has a more meandering structure that makes it more interesting but less instructional. All in all though, I really enjoyed it. The only thing I truly didn't like was that it gave very short shrift to some media that are only the line between craft and art. That would have seemed to be a very good topic for inclusion. But still a good book.

It's been almost fifteen years since I sat through an Aesthetics class, and mostly what I remember of it are the cram-packed class handouts enumerating the thirty to forty things we'd touch on each

period during our whirlwind tour of 2500 years of art theory. The only absolutely clear memories I have are of a Quincey Troupe poem about killing cattle and of watching John Cage perform 4'33, so it was nice to come across Freeland's basic intro to art theory, which served as a lucid and lovely refresher course. Freeland, whose academic background shows a bit in her "I'm going to show you how this/Now here's me showing you this" chapter formatting, still manages to be flexible enough to weave multiple approaches into the discussion of just a handful of works drawn from a wide spectrum of styles and periods. She juggles Kant and Hume and Freud in the same breath as Mapplethorpe, Goya, and fetish sculptures from the Kongo, and does it all in a clear, concise style. Scholars in the field will find nothing for them here - clearly, a 200 page primer is going to offer samples and simplifications rather than deep insights - but for those interested in exploring new ground (or trying to remember what it looks like more than a decade after taking a very rushed guided tour!), Freeland's book is an excellent starting point.

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