

But is it Art? By Cynthia Freeland

Review by Dany Louise

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A provocative and clever title is immediately attractive, especially one that is colourfully set on a minimalist white background. It seems to reinforce the promise of clarity and resolution, rather like a self-help book that suggests that the reader's life will be transformed at the end of the reading journey. In short, it is instantly seductive.

Freeland lays out her wares on page one. The book is about "what art is, what it means, and why we value it". Further, she says that "A theory should help things make sense rather than create obscurity through jargon and weighty words". Coming from a learned Professor of Philosophy at an American university, this is refreshing. It's written in easy language with ideas and concepts broken down and explained simply. Explanations are leavened with examples from current popular culture – references to icons such as Artforum and Marilyn Manson in the same sentence are not unusual. There are no expectations of prior knowledge; it is written for the genuinely puzzled but interested layperson, with a nod towards those of a sceptical nature. It's full of useful summaries of complex subjects, for example, the thinking around art as ritual, or the formation of canons as a representation of patriarchy.

As Freeland acknowledges in her introduction "...the data of art are so varied that it seems daunting to try and unify and explain them. Many modern artworks challenge us to figure out why, on any theory, they would count as art". Nevertheless, this is exactly what she tries to do. Over the next 200 short pages, (the book is in a "pocket-size" format), she gallops through theories of ritual, formalism, imitation, expression, cognition, gender, and the art markets, referencing the Ancient Greeks, 18th century enlightenment - Hume, Kant and Goya – before ending up with a chapter on digitising and disseminating that takes in both Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard. By this point the book is both involved and involving, with a concise deconstruction of MTV culture and a succinct criticism of Benjamin's comment that "The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one". (Freeland splendidly retorts that this is "dangerously close to a public with a vacant mind, or a controlled mind").

The difficulty is that attempting to sum up even twentieth century ideas about art is inevitably reductionist and partial. Predictably she raises more questions than she is able to answer, and discussion is repeatedly cut short. I thought she made a good explication of the Kantian view of beauty and aesthetics, emphasising the quest for objectivity in response to beauty and therefore

the necessity of emotional distance from the viewer. But she is unable to link that through to the Wordsworthian ideal of “emotion recollected in tranquillity” or to look at how this relates to the coolness that is characteristic of postmodern art.

Equally partial is the chapter on gender politics. Although it covers most bases, the emphasis is on American centred thought, and makes no mention of, for example, radical French feminist thinking.

On the back cover, a quote from the Independent hypothesises that this book “may well come to rival John Berger’s ‘Ways of Seeing’ ”. This is far too grand a claim, but it does skim convincingly across the surface of a range of art theories, and will make a decent stocking filler for friends who have a benign interest in art and would like to know more.