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### Winner: Invented Worlds: The Psychology of the Arts

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Winner: **Invented Worlds: The Psychology of the Arts**

**Ellen Winner.** *Invented Worlds: The Psychology of the Arts.* Boston: Harvard University Press, 1982. 431 pp. \$25.00.

**Reviewed by Brian Sutton-Smith**  
University of Pennsylvania

Ellen Winner's handsomely printed *Invented Worlds* does us all a tremendous favor by combining the two hitherto separate fields of the psychology and the developmental psychology of the arts in a general descriptive accounting. It is the successor to the Kreitlers' *Psychology of the Arts* (1972) and Howard Gardner's *The Arts and Human Development* (1973), with about two thirds in the general psychology domain and one third in the child domain. It is relatively nontheoretical as compared with those works and seems to prosper by not forcing its verdicts, particularly as it is so lucidly written and so explicit with respect to its own basic assumptions. Winner makes clear in her introduction that she will not be reviewing art education; she will not be concerned with the social dimension of the arts, or with the mediation of arts by culture, or with popular arts. Indeed:

This book examines how the adult perceiver responds to and makes sense of the art form in question, how these perceptual skills develop in the child, and how the ability to produce the art form develops. It thus delineates the adult end state of perceptual competence and the development of perceptual skills, and the development of productive skills in each art form. The book does not address the adult end state of productive competence. . . . Psychologists have tended to focus on the perception of art rather than upon its creation, probably because the former lends itself more readily to study in a laboratory. (p. 11)

So the question becomes how has she succeeded within these self-limitations which are so drastic that many might well contend that it is impossible to proceed.

She deals in turn with painting, music, and literature, but omits dance and theater. She details the struggle among psychologists over whether good art is a matter of psychodynamics (Freud), ego characteristics (Barron, McKinnon), or perceptual-cognitive processes (Guilford, Mednick, Goodman), and tends to come out for the less psychically encapsulated view that the answer might well lie in understanding the artist as a conscious craftsman deliberately moving through steps toward a goal (Arnheim, Perkins). Similarly, the perceiving audience is viewed in terms of contending psychological theories—psychodynamic, perceptual, and neurological—and once again

she tends to prefer the view that appreciation is based primarily on developed understanding and active engagement, although her most interesting evidence is from the work on individual differences in appreciation, much of which suggests that all of the psychological theories find some partial grounding in some kinds of atypicality. Her accounts on painting, music, and literature are largely descriptive of the present roles of perceptual and cognitive theory in psychology as applied to these art forms or rather as applied to some experimental analogue of them. Winner clearly approves of empirical and experimental approaches even if they are narrow or only partially relevant. She prefers these to logical and intuitive approaches (presumably theory of aesthetics), which tend to be highly relevant but too global. This is not to say she prefers Fechner to Freud, but rather she puts much weight on Berlyne, Arnheim, and Goodman. Unfortunately, one does not come away with the feeling that the empiricism of these and other psychologists has led to much more consensus about the nature of the arts than the logic of the aestheticians.

Her own conclusions from this book are that the perception of art is a problem-solving, active procedure tending to be at higher levels in those who are independent of mind and tolerant of complexity. Somewhat similarly she concludes that artists tend to be problem-seekers of much ego, strength, and autonomy, have a playfully daring attitude and a desire for experimentation, and are willing to violate convention. She protests, however, against the Western view that sees the artist as a solitary, driven creature, a creation of a culture that values Faustian exploration. And yet as her very results suggest it seems that that is the kind of artist being portrayed in these psychological results (autonomy, daring, violation, playfulness). The results both support the Western view and confine the psychological data to that very relativistic import.

Of greater interest to this reviewer was her construction of the young child's world of art in scribbling, making songs, and early stories. Here Winner is struggling with those who see children under the age of seven as merely an inadequate form of the adult, versus those who think there is something unique in the art that these youngsters produce. If a critic takes the viewpoint that the *production* of art is primarily what art is about, this part of the book becomes especially important because it is the only arena (albeit the production of infantile art) where the issue is faced. Younger children exhibit in their productions a preference for undulating melodies, clear contours, vivid contrasts, novelty, balance, high saturation, figurative expression, and climactic events. And there are parallels for their production in the work of chimpanzees, autistic Nadia, and damaged-right-brain



medical data, all of which she details in a most informative fashion. And paradoxically, most of which, if it is the underpinnings of artistic productivity, suggests that there may be more or less innate principles operating in very early artistic expression which make art, in infancy at least, a fairly generative noncognitive concern. That is as "cognition" is conceptualized in the adult centric traditions of information literature, which seem universally to privilege cognitive (formal) operations or reflectivity over other forms of intelligent responsiveness. But if art as music or story or painting or movement begins in forms which are a much more direct adaptation of perceptual response to textural possibility along certain fairly preset lines, then these early forms need more attention in any theory of artistic productivity.

Our discussion leads us to the major problem of the psychology of art: it seems to have so little to do with art. When nonartistic persons and their perception of art, or rather their perception of lines and shapes under laboratory circumstances, are the major subject matters, it seems very unlikely that this state of affairs has much to do with art. Thus I find myself in the paradoxical position of lauding Winner for her clear exposition of this psychological literature in a truly interesting book, and yet damning most of the enterprise she describes as very partially relevant to the function and form of art in human society. Throughout this work the individualistic tradition of the psychologist constantly leads to assertions that art is something that goes on in the head of the autonomous individual as perceiver or producer. That head is the same head that is the repository of all those other homunculi studied by psychologists and generally described by such names as traits, IQs, egos, divergent thinking, and the like. To study art only as an individual function is to make it a kind of fellow traveler with formalism and essentialism in aesthetic theory. In this psychology art is produced by transcendent psychic function, instead of transcendent spirit of art or of the times, the risk any scholar of art makes when he seeks to reduce art to psychological function and pays no attention to its social functions or its cultural mediation. Making it context-free may not be making it at all in a realm of experience which has more to do with hermeneutics than with prediction.

Further, I am persuaded there is something implicitly conservative in these worlds that are built by psychologists about art. By privileging adult appreciation over child appreciation and by neglecting adult productivity, the psychologists neglect dealing with the potential embarrassment that art can be to traditional views of culture or scholarly function. To act as if artistry is first and foremost an activity of the mind, as current cognitive approaches do, is to treat the mind

as if it exists only in a vacuum (or a laboratory), instead of always with its own body, legs, fingers, feelings, and in a context of persons, culture, and individual exigencies.

This book portrays the worlds invented by psychologists in their own derivative festival of the arts when they reduce that domain to their causalist and individualist metaphors. The invented worlds of artists appear not yet to have become accessible to the psychology of the arts, and perhaps they never will if psychologists don't make real artists their end state instead of Piaget and his formal operations.