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### Review Of "A Theory Of Art" By K. Berger

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*A Theory of Art* by Karol Berger

Review by: Richard Eldridge

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In this brief survey I have omitted whole topic areas—dance therapy, kinesiology, and festivals, among others—and repeatedly swerved toward the West because of my own training and bent. I hope nonetheless to have disclosed some sense of the *IED*'s broad geographical coverage, as well as the adventurousness of its editors, the high caliber of its contributors, the freshness of its research, the eclecticism of its disciplinary approaches, and the efficiency and sometimes downright excellence of its writing. For despite the *IED*'s imperfections, quirks, and occasional lacunae, it stands as a great achievement whose editors have accomplished the feat, as the first edition of the *New Grove* did twenty years ago, of commissioning essays (some of which will stand as classics) from scholars and writers at the top of their professions, and publishing an encyclopedia that immediately established itself as indispensable. (And more so than the 1980 *Grove*, it must be noted, the *IED* reached both across disciplinary boundaries and into the realm of the practitioner when recruiting its contributors.) The *IED* is now by far the most comprehensive and rigorous dance reference source available—one that also closes many longstanding gaps in dance scholarship and sets a new standard for it. It has solved the problem noted some time ago by Agnes deMille, who lamented the lack of an inclusive reference work on dance thus: "Nothing is comprehensive, nothing catholic, nothing sweeping, and this we must have" (1:xxx). Now we do, and this is good news for all of us.

MARIAN SMITH

*A Theory of Art*, by Karol Berger. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xiv, 287 pp.

In *A Theory of Art*, Karol Berger undertakes something that many readers will think is no longer possible: a theory of art in the grand, traditional style, that is, a philosophical specification of the nature of art in general, comprehending various works in various media in various historical periods. This philosophical specification is also intended to yield an account of the value of art—as though works as diverse as Bartók's quartets, Whitman's poems, Jean Renoir's *The River*, and the novels of Dickens all have some common value. Berger's ambition is both breathtaking and welcome. If we are not able to say something general about art and its value, then we are in danger of reducing the values of artworks to one or another form of exterior instrumentality: political, economic, cognitive, religious, or tribal, as may be the case.

Berger begins in chapters 1 and 2 by considering the media of art and the uses of works of art. He suggests that most philosophy of art is mistakenly preoccupied with the identification of works of art. In contrast, he says, "I am trying to shift the focus of aesthetics to the question, What should the function of

art be, if art is to have a value for us?" (p. viii). Here Berger is mistaken that a great shift in the philosophy of art is called for. Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Collingwood, and Dewey among others, all defined art in terms of its function and offered rich accounts of the value of art in and for life. It is only philosophers with essentially empiricist commitments (such as Hume) who focus on identification at the expense of function and value. But Berger's value-oriented stance is correct. Given the spectacular material diversity of art objects, if we are to define art (other than indexically), the definition will have to be cast in functional and value-laden terms. As Berger puts it, "In a pragmatic spirit, I take the question, What is  $x$ ? to be equivalent to, What is the function of  $x$ ? Or, What is  $x$  for? We know what something is when we know what can be, should be, or is being done with it" (p. 3). As Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam have argued, this is not true for definitions of natural-kind terms such as *gold* or *tiger*. But it is compelling for artifactual-kind terms such as *art*.

So what *can* we do, *should* we do, or *do* we do with art—with works of art in general? Is there any plausible and useful answer that can be given to this question? Berger argues that art is a worthwhile pursuit (and artworks have a distinct nature) if and only if (1) art has an indispensable cultural function, (2) that function is fulfillable by it alone (so that art has no external purposes), and (3) that function is fulfilled by much existing art (so that our theory will not be a mere philosopher's abstraction, out of touch with what is actually made and cared about as art) (p. 11).

What, then, is the indispensable cultural function that the things we centrally care about as art uniquely fulfill? In specifying the function of art, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and others all helped themselves in part to a general account of the functions of things. For Aristotle, nature is the result of, and is useful for, divine intelligence contemplating itself in and through its embodiment in things; human rational nature is a privileged site of this work of divine intelligence, since it alone is capable of rationally investigating the rest of nature; and artistic imitations are generated as part of rational humanity's reflection on its own situation, functions, and limitations. Kant offers a similar, but sparser and more frankly conjectural, teleology of human reason in relation to nature. Hegel and Heidegger, in reaction to Kant, offer something once again thicker. But none of these accounts of the functions of nature, of rational humanity, or of art is likely, on its own, to prove persuasive. They seem too conjectural and too likely to privilege one form of artistic practice in the face of art's legitimate varieties (as in Heidegger's casting of Greek temples and Hölderlin's hymns as nearly the only genuine works of art). Human beings have, it seems, multiple interests rather than any single defining function, and works of art seem to come in different shapes so as to answer to those diverse human interests. So how, now, plausibly, can we talk about *the* function of art?

Berger's response to this question is to reflect simultaneously on a considerable range of past works in various media *and* on how a function definitive

of art might better or best be fulfilled now. To adopt this method is self-consciously to make the philosophy of art less abstract, to bring it into closer alignment with criticism. The philosophy of art will hence have simultaneously a representationalist-realist dimension (describing much of what has been most plausibly regarded as art) and a critical-utopian dimension (evaluating the past and pointing to what art might be in the future). The philosophy of art must be both an account and an argument, both attentive to the past and normative for the future. In simultaneously representing artistic practice and recommending ways of continuing it, the philosophy of art will itself be an ongoing practice of responsive critical reflection, not a completable quasi-science. All this is, in my own view, exactly right. It is an indispensable stance if we are to think and talk reasonably about functions and values at all. (This picture of the philosophy of art does, however, undermine Berger's way elsewhere of distinguishing philosophy as argument about possibilities from art as fictional representation, from history as representation of actuality, and from science as argument about actuality [p. 58]. Contra Berger, philosophy as both representation and critical argument runs through and across these other three practices.)

Berger's guiding articulation of the function that artworks fulfill, which he elicits from his critical reflections on past works and on the media of art, then runs like this: the media of culture, and art among them, allow

us to begin to find out what we should want and what we should avoid, to make choices between various objects of our desire and between competing or conflicting desires, to justify our desires and ensuing actions to ourselves and to others, to justify our feelings. Ultimately, the media allow us to deliberate on the question, How should we live?, to choose to the extent that it is possible our actions and passions and to justify our choices. (p. 66)

Put thus abstractly, this conception of art's function falls squarely in the tradition of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Collingwood, and Dewey; it has considerable persuasive power. Everything turns, however, on exactly how this picture is further filled in, in particular on what conception of deliberation and choice is developed.

In developing his account of choice, Berger initially begins with instrumentalist-sounding language. Art is able "to evoke imaginary worlds" (p. 62), and by doing so it can "spell out . . . the actual and likely consequences of [a] form of life" (p. 67), so that we might see whether it is desirable. But *desirable* in what sense? Here Berger attempts to balance a theory of the good (as what it is correct to desire) against a more pluralist and naturalist theory of desires (as wants that are simply given). His account of deliberation about the desirable is mostly developed by sorting through various traditional theories. Conscience is best at telling us what not to do; it is not so good at articulating what is affirmatively desirable (pp. 70–71). Kant's account of practical reason is similarly empty of substantive normative content (p. 71). In contrast Hegel

usefully teaches us that “our duty is to engage in the perfecting of some of the practices of our society and to take care of the institutions that make these practices possible” (p. 72). Herder helps us to see how to be both faithful to our own traditions and open-minded (p. 73). Aristotle helps us to see how representations “teach us to feel right” (p. 78): to pity the pitiable, to fear the fearful, to admire the admirable, and to desire the genuinely desirable.

For Berger, no univocal account of choice and its proper objects emerges from this survey of philosophical theories of deliberation. There will be ongoing argument within and between cultures about what is desirable. In responding to these arguments, judgment will be necessary, as Gadamer reminds us (p. 86). Taking pleasure in artworks and their original yet intelligible orderings of their materials prepares us to love freedom as an intelligibly ordered and humanly expressive way of life, as Kant and Schiller suggest (p. 102). In sum, and deliberately echoing Hegel, Berger maintains that art is “capable of giving sensuous embodiment and representation to our most profound needs and concerns” (p. 243).

Berger further describes how works in various media fulfill their function of embodying and representing profound needs and concerns. He defines works of art as “physical objects produced in the process of encoding an experience in a medium” (p. 18). The relevant experience is the experience of a presented world. “A work requires being interpreted as a world” (p. 24): it presents something. What a work presents, however, may be something quite abstract. For example, following Richard Wollheim and Kendall Walton,<sup>1</sup> Berger holds that as soon as we see one color area *behind* another, we are seeing something presented: intentional objects with spatial relations discerned through imaginative “seeing-in,” not mere blobs of color. As a result, the distinction between representational and abstract works of art does not really hold. All works of art present something. Sculpture can represent space (and ways of apprehending it imaginatively), even when otherwise abstract, as well as simply occupying it. Painting can represent light. Most important, music too, including absolute music, is representational or presents a world, even if in a weak sense. It does not normally depict specific objects or events. In a linear ordering of media running from those that emphasize the mode of presentation to those that emphasize the matter or specific objects presented, absolute music ranks at the far end of emphasis on mode. It lacks specific presented objects and offers only a “plot of moods” (p. 210) or an “abstract plot devoid of any subject or object” (p. 212). But—as Roger Scruton argues at length in *The Aesthetics of Music*<sup>2</sup>—we hear *tones*, not mere sounds, as intentional objects that lead to one another. As Berger puts it, “The tonal and metric hearing

1. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 46, 62; and Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 55–56.

2. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997; see esp. chap. 2, “Tone,” pp. 19–79.

of pitches and beats, the fact that we hear some of them as wanting to move, or as being pulled, toward others, means that what we hear in real sounds is something imaginary” (p. 31), that is, relations of departing from and leading to that are *essentially* discerned through the imaginative “hearing in” of what is there to be heard.

Against the background of his accounts of the function and media of art in chapters 1 and 2, Berger offers—in a central chapter 3 that will be of the greatest interest to readers of this journal—“The Genealogy of Modern European Art Music.” Self-conscious art music, intended for active and repeated hearing, comes on the scene only when notation systems for fixing a work in writing are available. The “abstract logic of tonal relations” (p. 133) then becomes a possible focus of attention for its own sake, rather than something subsumed to the needs of religious ritual or the immediate gratifications of popular song.

Berger sees the subsequent evolution of European art music as dominated by the pursuit of two contrasting ways of developing the logic of tonal relations. From roughly 1350 to 1550, the chief aim was the embodiment of continuous consonance; the *ars perfecta* of musical Pythagoreanism with its consonant polyphony was dominant. From roughly 1550 to 1650, a second aim of representing the passions of individuals came slowly to displace or jostle the first aim. Beginning chiefly with Monteverdi, composers sought to “express and impress . . . the passions of the words” (p. 124) of the texts they set. Berger reads Rameau’s 1722 *Traité de l’harmonie* as a reversion to the musical Pythagoreanism of Zarlino’s 1558 *Le istituzioni harmonice*. In contrast, Rousseau’s emphasis (against Rameau) on melody and the imitation of the passions in his *Essai sur l’origine des langues* is viewed as a continuation of Galileo’s progressive musical humanism in his 1581 *Dialogo della musica antica, et della moderna*. This interestingly and plausibly reverses the usual account of the Rousseau-Rameau debate. The underlying causes of the shift away from musical Pythagoreanism and toward mimetic individualism are complex. They include—at least—the rise of modern physics (with its undermining of belief in a harmoniously ordered cosmos), the rediscovery of ancient humanist texts in the late fifteenth century, and the general increase in possibilities of the development of individuality that modernity inaugurates.

With the advent of “Classical” style from roughly 1780 to 1820, purely instrumental music—as Schopenhauer, Hanslick, Dahlhaus, and others have argued—becomes centrally important as a way of “giving expression to an essential metaphysical region inaccessible to language” (p. 135). This later shift returns to the idea that music has metaphysical significance, but its significance is now to present the vicissitudes of an inexhaustible longing within, not a harmonious cosmos without. With increasing secularization and changes in the patronage system, artists of all kinds come to feel that their work—expressing their aspirations for deep social reciprocity or communion—is both significant and yet lacks any ready audience. “By presenting instrumental discourses of considerable size, discourses the internal coherence and sense of which were



based on the harmonic and motivic logic of tonal relations, mature Viennese symphonies and string quartets demanded to be taken seriously as objects of aesthetic contemplation" (p. 138). Throughout the nineteenth century, this achievement of Viennese "Classical" style music fractures into a "competition" (p. 139) between the frank mimeticism of program music and the avant-gardism of abstract absolute music, and the hold of art music on its audiences becomes less secure.

Avant-gardist anti-mimeticism comes to dominance in the early twentieth century. Schoenberg and his successors at Darmstadt attempted to work out significant patterns of purely musical gesture that would resist both the insinuating but trivial charms of an increasingly broad entertainment culture and the political engineering of culture by the likes of Stalin and Zhdanov. But their gestures of resistance become increasingly formal and empty. As they depart further from mimesis, they face a threat of sheer emptiness and unreceivability, leading Berger to ask whether the "threat of meaninglessness" that attends abstract art music's separation from all mimeticism can be overcome (p. 149).

Here Berger suggests that we might hope for "some form of rapprochement and accommodation between the abstract and mimetic ideas, a refertilization of abstraction with mimesis" (p. 150). We can already sense something of this in musicology in Anthony Newcomb's work on "archetypal plots" of purely abstract works (p. 150)<sup>3</sup> and in musical works that indulge in anthropomorphic gestures, figurative titles, allusions and quotations, and invocations of practical or social functions of music such as dance. Among contemporary composers who strike him as usefully working to bring abstraction and mimesis together in music, Berger lists Ligeti, Penderecki, Carter, Lutoslawski, and Berio.

These trends inspire hope that the canon of art music has not been closed with the generation of the 1880s. The perspectives of new music seem brighter today than at any point in the last fifty years, as the hunger for art carrying a spiritual significance reasserts itself and as the mid-century Cold War conditions become a faint memory. . . . What becomes increasingly more likely . . . is that the best composition today will attract more than the professionals and the canon will expand again, because the most ambitious and talented composers will no longer see any need to continue the self-mutilating ban on mimesis and tonality, no longer feel that they must speak an artificial Esperanto or not be heard at all. (p. 151)

3. See Newcomb's "Narrative Archetypes and Mahler's Ninth Symphony," in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and "Action and Agency in Mahler's Ninth Symphony, Second Movement," in *Music and Meaning*, ed. Jenefer Robinson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). I might also mention the work of Fred Everett Maus and Kendall Walton. See especially Maus, "Music as Drama," *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (1988): 56–73; and Walton, "Listening with Imagination: Is Music Representational?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 47–61, both reprinted in Robinson, ed., *Music and Meaning*.



One might quarrel with a number of features of *A Theory of Art*. It is not clear that Berger's hope for a satisfying future musical practice, within which abstraction and mimesis come together, is more plausible than Leonard B. Meyer's 1994 prediction of increasing formalism, style pluralism, and emptiness in music.<sup>4</sup> Berger provides only sketchy remarks about contemporary composers and no real analysis of any of their works. It is regrettable that he pays no attention to the composers who might well be seen as having successfully struggled to blend abstraction with mimesis from roughly the 1930s to the 1970s: say, Copland, Bartók, and especially Shostakovich. Berger's list of composers of present interest seems eclectic and ill-considered. Why not John Adams or George Rochberg or William Schumann, each of whom might seem to illustrate Berger's claims better than the more abstract, less mimetic Berio or Carter? Berger's metaphysics of tone and hearing is not as fully developed as the similar theory in Scruton. Nor is his account of artistic representation in various media as detailed as that of Kendall Walton, on whom he draws. His account of authentic moral deliberation is somewhat sketchy and not always argumentative where it needs to be. Set against these difficulties, however, is Berger's considerable accomplishment in mastering and integrating enormously difficult and diverse materials from history, philosophy, social theory, and musicology, and doing so with enormous learning, élan, and even courage. This accomplishment sets an agenda to be worked through further, as readers will unavoidably find themselves considering and responding to lines of thought about art and its value—and also about music's particular possibilities of achievement—that Berger has broached.

RICHARD ELDRIDGE

4. Meyer, "Postlude—Future Tense: Music, Ideology, and Culture," in his *Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth-Century Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 317–49.