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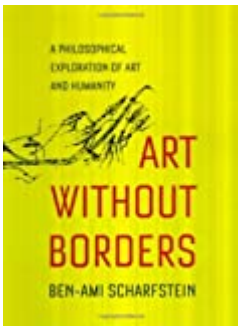

Ben-Ami Scharfstein. *Art Without Borders: A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Illustrations. xiv + 543 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-73609-9.

Reviewed by Pamela Allara

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Alike and Yet So Different: Art from All Places and Times

Ben-Ami Scharfstein is an emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Tel-Aviv who has written on comparative religion and the universality of the art instinct in humans, animals, and birds, among other topics. A nonagenarian, Scharfstein seems to have set a goal with this bulky text to summarize the development of his philosophy of art over the course of his long life. It is difficult not to sympathize with such a project. When I look over the stacks of books I have accumulated over the years, now piled on shelves and stuffed into closets, I am tempted to review and correlate them into my own grand theory of art and culture (before heading to the book donation bin at Whole Foods). This book has a number of virtues, among the most salient of which is the cautionary tale it provides about the potential drawbacks of such a project. "Art and Humanity" is a dauntingly broad topic, and one that ipso facto limits the possibility of nuanced argumentation. On the positive side, Scharfstein, in providing a global overview of art's creation and reception, does at least attempt to mitigate the Western bias that inflects many investigations of non-Western art. According to a generous review by Julian Bell in *The New York Review of Books*, "*Art Without Borders* is indeed as wide-ranging a survey of the available literature on art as any single author could probably produce."[1] How well the survey succeeds in eliminating a Western bias is another matter.

Scharfstein's philosophical investigation of art and humanity is divided into five chapters, each with ten or more topics. The progression of the narrative follows the familiar arc of art history survey texts: from a broad definition of "art," to the classical traditions, to the creative chaos of modernism. The difference from those standard texts is that Western and non-Western art is discussed in each chapter, with the goal of demonstrating that the underlying principles of the artworks under discussion are fundamentally the same. He supports this thesis without reference to the critical theory that has dominated recent aesthetic discourse, but rather cites psychological theories of perception and includes broad references to anthropological scholarship.

Chapter 1, "An Open Aesthetics," does not so much attempt to define "art" per se, so much as to ask why it exists. According to the author, "art satisfies the inescapable human hunger for imagined experience in all of its imaginable variations. This hunger is our need to create, contemplate, possess and repossess at least the shadow of what we do not have fully enough to satisfy us" (p. 3). I interpret this to mean that art compensates in the realm of the imagination for the limitations of our quotidian lives. This seems to me a rather negative starting point, but fortunately Scharfstein offers more positive interpretations of humanity's imaginative faculties throughout the text. Unfortunately, in the last analysis, readers are not provided with a coherent argument that demonstrates "how art's variety is qualified by its unity, and vice versa" (p. 6). Scharfstein has read voluminously and each section of each chapter provides summaries of a given topic or argument, but these tend to stand on their own, without adequate links to the others. In chapter 1, for instance, he places aesthetic experience under the rubrics of "being aware, seeing, and remembering," which he first discusses in terms of visual perception; he then shifts to an argument that the works of Dante, Michelangelo, and Wagner were precipitated by an ideal of love that they never found in life; and he then follows with lengthy discussions of handedness, the human response to patterns, ideals of beauty derived from our responses to faces or foot binding, a lively analysis of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's "Painting by Numbers" project (1993), and, finally, the notion of creative "flow." In parts, it is very interesting, as long as one is not worried about whether or not a consistent argument is being built. Throughout the book, Scharfstein addresses the problem of lack of structure by providing summary lists. Chapter 1 ends with thirty-one numbered paragraphs that address the question: "How does art communicate experience that is verbally or logically incommunicable?" (p. 66). These constitute his "theory," or position, which he argues cannot be judged right or wrong; rather he hopes that it will be judged "not only by its explicit arguments but, like the art it discusses, by its less-than-obvious tendencies and character" (p. 71).

Chapter 2, "Selfless Tradition," brings together "traditional" or "primitive" cultures with stylistic traditions, such as Western classicism. Again, the examples he selects to discuss a given artist's relationship to the past are vivid, while the cross-cultural comparisons he makes are "less-than-obvious." Near the end of the chapter, he compares a detail of a landscape by the Ming painter Tung Ch'I-Ch'ang, *The Ch'ing Pure Mountain in the Manner of Tung Yuan* (1617), with a detail from Michelangelo's *Day* (ca. 1530), as follows: "the two were bold, forceful persons, so it is unlikely to be an accident that Tung's mountains and mountain ranges are in their bulges, thrusts and forceful organization not unlike Michelangelo's figures' bulging muscles, thrusting movements, and forceful organization. In both cases, what one sees is an aware, knowledgeable, creative, passionate reworking of tradition" (p. 170). This is an example of what we art historians used to call a pseudo-morph. Although Scharfstein concedes that his comparison is a very broad one, this example is nonetheless central to his argument that the creative imagination functions in a similar manner across cultures. However, the two details, wrested from their contexts, cannot hope to prove his point, which in any event is internally inconsistent. Both artists use bulging forms either because of their bold personalities or because, whatever their personality type, they are reworking traditions.

Chapter 3, "Egocentric Innovation," addresses the topic of the artist/genius who defies tradition, which in Scharfstein's view, best characterizes the artistic personality. In his introduction, he defines creative geniuses in terms borrowed from Giorgio Vasari: great enthusiasm and commitment to work, wide interests, an ability to connect previously unconnected trains of thought, and an introverted and independent personality. Finally, he postulates that the link between genius and mental illness is a plausible one (p. 225). The descriptions he provides of Chinese, Indian, and African "geniuses" in the rest of the chapter reinforce this view in turn. For instance, in the 1950s, the Liberian sculptor "Zra" boasts to the German anthropologist Hans Himmelherber: "I am called Zra. Zra means 'God.' People gave me this name because I am able, like God, to create such beautiful things with my own hands.... I was born with this ability. No one showed me how to carve" (p. 254). Although as always he is willing to qualify his argument by conceding that geniuses may possibly be the exception to the rule, he clearly thinks that this artist-type exemplifies the creative process in its purest form. Geniuses are "all alike, all different," he exclaims, none too helpfully (p. 260). Of course, none of the geniuses he mentions in this chapter happen to be women.

Moreover, when discussing African art, he dismisses collectively produced art as buried in the secrecy of ritual, and therefore inaccessible as art. In bolstering his argument that art is about personal expression and personal reception, he summarizes Susan Vogel's writings on the Baule from the Ivory Coast as follows: "In Baule art and

life, individual desires, individual possessions, and the competition between individuals is the rule. Most art objects are the property of individuals, who alone have the right to use them. The individuality of the objects helps to establish the individuality of its maker or owner" (p. 255). Six uses of the term individuals/individuality in three sentences–I wonder what Vogel would think about the emphasis on a Western idea of originality here? Again, while Scharfstein's anecdotal narratives can be illuminating, his governing concepts are consistently anachronistic, based as they frequently are on outdated sources.

For the readers of this Web site, the chapter of greatest interest in *Art Without Borders* should be chapter 4, "Intersecting Worlds and Identities," which discusses not the parallels between artistic creations from different cultures, but the ways in which "first" and "third" world artistic traditions have intersected. Aboriginal, Inuit, and African artists, or modern "Primitives" as he calls them, are discussed in terms of the rewarding individual careers they enjoyed through the assistance they gained from Western artist-activists, such as Georgina and Ulli Beier, or "the friendly guides of one culture and the eager learners of the other," as he phrases it (p. 329). The art of all of the artists, among them Mathias Kauage (Papua New Guinea), Pitseolak Ashoona (Inuit, Canada), Albert Namatijira (Aboriginal, Australia), Twins Seven-Seven (Nigeria), and the "popular" (i.e., self-taught) artist ChÃ©ri Samba (Democratic Republic of the Congo), is framed in terms of personal biography and skirts the thorny issues of identity. Fundamental scholarship on hybridity and migration, from Stuart Hall to Okwui Enwezor, is ignored.

In his preface to *Art Without Borders*, Scharfstein excuses the paucity of illustrations in the book by arguing that the reader can find examples of any image he mentions online.[2] It is true that we may no longer need illustrated art books; most survey texts now come with accompanying Web sites and CDs. However, to write an entire book on the topic of global culture with no mention of colonialism or of the influence of visual culture on contemporary art borders on irresponsibility. For Scharfstein, art remains synonymous with painting and sculpture made by individuals for individual reception. He is not prepared to deal with the expanded definitions of "art" that the fields of visual culture and critical theory have provided over the past quarter century or more. However, as Allen Roberts has pointed out, until recently most scholarly writings on visual culture have paid scant attention to non-Western art, and to his credit Scharfstein does attempt in each chapter to give equal weight to the art of all of the cultures he discusses.[3] Yet mass-reproduced images are not to be studied in their own right; rather, they provide us with a ready introduction to different cultures and make it possible "for us to come closer than before to a wide-ranging aesthetic agreement with one another." And then, moving to the topic of aesthetic judgment, he adds this zinger: "As for standards, there is a set, quite explicit in Western and Chinese and Chinese-influenced art that can be accepted as general and even approximately universal. To the extent that this is true, when one affirms, for the sake of social decency, that every art tradition is the equal of every other (by virtue, at least of its incommensurability), one may add (in a low voice) that it ought not to be heretical to favor one aesthetic tradition over another, especially for its richness or the qualities in which it excels" (pp. 366-367).[4] This is certainly a telling passage; there has been an elitist masquerading as an aesthetic pluralist all along.

In the last sentence of his book, the author thanks the reader for "coming along with me and keeping me company" (p. 437). Given the length and often confusing structure of the text, as well as its lack of address to contemporary critical discourse, I doubt most readers will get that far. If it had been more modest in its aims, and less insistent in referencing everything the author had read, the final product might have retained the reader's interest. In a work about the human faculty of the imagination, Scharfstein's discussion of the creative arts lacks just that aspect. Because in the final analysis he is unable to shed his Western bias, *Art Without Borders* is less illuminating than self-indulgent. Nonetheless, his thesis that art is "universal" remains seductive. Jeff Koons told the *New York Times*: âWhen I view the world, I donât think of my own work. I think of my hope that, through art, people can get a sense of the type of invisible fabric that holds us all together, that holds the world together.â[5]

Notes

[1]. Julian Bell, "Why Art?" review of *Art Without Borders: A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity*, by Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The New York Review of Books* 56, no. 15 (October 8, 2009): 22. In a footnote, Bell states that "a better argued meditation" on the global art world, with its glut of images, can be found in David Carrier's *A World Art History and Its Objects* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

[2]. Of the eight illustrations, two are photographs of chimpanzees, and one is a doodle by the author–very random choices, in my opinion.

[3]. Allen Roberts, "Musings about Contemporary Studies of Visual Practices," review of *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*, ed, Matthew Rampley, H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews (December, 2008).

[4]. The assertion is repeated, almost word for word, on page 434.

[5]. Randy Kennedy, âThe Koons Collection,â *The New York Times*, *Arts & Leisure*, February 28, 2010, A23.

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