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*Art in Action* presents a comprehensive aesthetic theory marked by lucidity and Christian concern. Its author once remarked: “We in the Reformed tradition have too long talked about culture as if it were isolated from society.” *Art in Action* corrects that Reformed tendency and, partly for this reason, merits careful consideration by readers of *Philosophia Reformata*.

Wolterstorff challenges the pervasive notion that aesthetic contemplation is art’s essential purpose. He proposes instead an instrumental theory according to which works of art have many diverse roles in human action. While opposing both intellectual elitism and aesthetic impoverishment in Western society, Wolterstorff affirms art as a gracious gift enlisting human responsibility.
Only a close reading can do justice to this provocative book. The reader may be aided, however, by my discussing some issues the book raises. These pertain to the social character of art, Wolterstorff's critique of "high art," and his method of defining works of art.

Wolterstorff is impressed by art's social character. He is especially impressed by the way in which art's dominant role in Western society's institution of high art has blinded aestheticians and lay persons alike. Since the eighteenth century, perceptual contemplation for aesthetic satisfaction has become the primary intended public use for high art. According to Wolterstorff, this primary use has blinded us to art's many other uses and functions.

Though I would grant Wolterstorff his main point, his concept of action strikes me as inappropriate. The concept is derived from a theory of speech-acts. Wolterstorff's account treats actions as links in chains of natural causality and quasi-causality. Works of art and said to "enter into a wide variety of human action" both by being used as objects of actions and by functioning in actions that either causally generate other actions or count as other actions. Thus, to use Wolterstorff's example, by making the painting St. Paul an object of appropriate actions, Rembrandt "causally generated...the action of giving people aesthetic delight" (p. 16). This formulation sounds odd. Its oddity might indicate the inappropriateness of analyzing artworks in terms of effective human conduct.

In any case, several questions could be asked. Can the notions of "causal generation" and "count generation" do justice to the structure of any human actions, including speech-acts? Can this structure be derived from an analysis of speech-acts? Apart from such questions of sociological import, one wonders whether much light is shed on works of art by placing them in a network of actions whose effects are other actions. Doesn't this placement reduce works of art to nondescript conduits of interactions and lock artistic activity into the achieving of certain intended public uses? Perhaps Rembrandt causally generated, and intended to generate, the paying of a commission. But how much does this intended use tell us about St. Paul as an artwork or about the complex productive process in which it took shape? Besides, are not painting pictures, speaking, and extending cups of cold water activities of distinct kinds? Does aesthetics gain anything by subsuming poiesis, energeia, and praxis under the general structure of "action"?

These questions bring us to Wolterstorff's critique of "high art." Arts do occur in specific social institutions, as Wolterstorff claims. Less than satisfactory, however, are his descriptions and conclusions concerning Western society's "institution of high art."

This institution is described as "the characteristic...patterns of action pertaining to the production, distribution, and use" of any artworks "used (in the way intended by artist or distributor) almost exclusively by the members of [our cultural] elite" (p. 22). Salient features of the institution are a separation of art from life, the immensity of diverse repertoire, an emphasis on aesthetic contemplation, the religion of liberating creativity, and an interiorizing of the artistic community (pp. 24-63). These features are accompanied by aesthetic impoverishment in everyday life. For Christians Wolterstorff proposes a double strategy (pp. 175-199): for the
sake of aesthetic excellence in cities, churches, and daily life, liberate life from high art's blinding spell; and, when participating in the institution of high art, assess priorities, struggle to integrate artistic goals and Christian commitment, and resist any claims for the ultimacy of art.

It is not readily apparent, however, why the institution of high art should trouble us. Wouldn't most of us prefer art's aesthetic use by intellectuals over self-aggrandizement by aristocratic patrons or indoctrination by an ecclesiastical hierarchy? Isn't there something profoundly democratic and enlightening about Western society's high art, in contrast to its "works of popular art," which are largely kitsch, and to its "works of the tribe," which function as commercial propaganda? Wouldn't Wolterstorff's descriptions of high art be more telling if they were set beside such features in our "low" art as the substitution of entertainment for life, the immensity of standardized repertoire, an emphasis on commercial success, the religion of passive conformity, and the heroizing of the "stars"? Surely aesthetic squalor cannot be blamed on high art's spell, nor can aesthetic excellence be attained simple by disenchantment. Surely a critique of high art should not dispense with a critique of low art, nor should Christians be content with restrained participation that does nothing to revolutionize our society's entire institution of art.

Let me suggest that all our forms of art hang together in an economic subsystem within advanced capitalism. This subsystem effectively absorbs or marginalizes most serious artistic challenges to the status quo. At the same time the subsystem insures that most artworks serve to ratify the status quo. Traditionally aesthetic theory has played a key role in this subsystem, our society's institution of art. To penetrate that institution, aesthetic theory must resist being lured by "high art" into stressing consumption and educational status as defining factors in the institution. "Aesthetic contemplation" by an "intellectual elite" does occur in our society's institution of high art. But a critical aesthetics should push past these factors to the often destructive economic processes of production and distribution behind them. Despite Wolterstorff's discussion of "production, distribution, and use," his critique of high art stops short of the economic base and the unusual commodity character of all art in our society.

My concluding comments concern an "essentially contested concept" in aesthetics, to use W. B. Gallie's phrase. What is "a work of art"? Wolterstorff avoids specifying art's supposed essence, although he does not claim with Morris Weitz that art is an "open concept." Instead Wolterstorff mentions several different concepts associated with the English phrase "work of art." Rather than vainly looking for the correct definition, he chooses one definition as the one most suitable for his purposes: "a work of (fine) art" is "a product of one of the (fine) arts" (p. 17). Despite the ambiguity created by parentheses, his chosen definition clearly points to a modern concept of fine art that groups together "music, poetry, drama, literary fiction, visual depiction, ballet and modern dance, film, and sculpture" (pp. 6, 7). Later Wolterstorff says "an art is a fine art in a given society if in that society products of that art are regularly . . . produced or distributed with disinterested contemplation as one of the primary intended uses" (p. 37). If historically the classifying of music, poetry, etc. as
“art” emerged when disinterested contemplation of musical, poetic, and other products became a primary use, then Wolterstorff’s chosen definition may not be appropriate for his own discussion.

Wolterstorff admirably refuses to exclude by definition certain products that do not have disinterested contemplation as a primary intended use. On his chosen definition, however, to call a piece of church music a work of art would be to classify that piece as a product of an art whose products are regularly used for disinterested contemplation. In other words, the ontological status of liturgical music would be specified with reference to the very institution of high art whose blinding spell Wolterstorff intends to break. Given his intent, either the chosen definition is not entirely suitable, or entities such as liturgical compositions are not properly called works of art, not even when they are cited as evidence for the diverse roles of art in action.

Fortunately the traditional problems of aesthetics have not kept Wolterstorff from taking a fresh look at the field of phenomena we call art. For this look, and for the Christian insight it affords, we may be very thankful.

LAMBERT ZUIDERVAART