

The Arts in Society

Art in Action, by Nicholas Wolterstorff,
Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980. x + 240 pp.

THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION is currently reevaluating the patronage of the National Endowments for both the Arts and the Humanities. Cuts of up to fifty percent have been recommended for both Endowments. At the heart of the federal aid issue are questions concerning the purpose of art and the function of the artist in society. Art is a part of the complete cultural framework just as man's aesthetics are a part of his entire being. Practically everyone, regardless of political persuasion or social standing, is exposed to some form of art in the course of a day. The arts are, and should continue to be, a recognized and important ingredient in people's lives. *Art in Action*, by Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, proposes a novel approach to the arts that could serve to rejuvenate and redirect the American cultural enterprise.

The contemporary Western perspective on art is that art exists solely for the purpose of aesthetic contemplation. This approach is rejected by Wolterstorff in favor of the notion that art serves a legitimate and important function in everyday life. His thesis is that "works of art are instruments and objects of action" for both the artist and the public. He tackles the fundamental question of the definition and purpose of art. "Art—so often thought of as a way of getting out of the world—is man's way of acting *in* the world. *Artistically man acts*," says Wolterstorff. Art serves no specific purpose, but plays "an enormous diversity of roles in human life." Eight major arts are defined: music, poetry, drama, literary fiction, visual depiction, ballet and modern dance, film, and sculpture. Wolterstorff focuses on the importance of recognizing these arts as both *instruments* of action on the part of the artist and *objects* of action as used and viewed by the public. He argues, therefore,

that the artist intends a public use for his artwork. "The Romantic notion that the artist simply pours his soul into his work with no thought of any public use for that work is wildly false to the realities of art."

The author creates an intricate framework of reference for discussing art's place in society; he also attempts to define every step in the process of clarifying the complex cultural structure that evolves. He applies a theoretical approach to his philosophic discussion through the use of diagrams to explain the multifunctional role of art. Progressing logically from point to point, Wolterstorff intermittently pauses to dwell on potentially ambiguous phrases, situations, and especially definitions. For example, in a chapter entitled "The Aesthetic," he introduces his own set of symbols and terminology to describe the aesthetic dimension of reality and of works of art. But after reading seven pages of explanation concerning aesthetic qualities, aesthetic character, and canonical presentation, the reader is relieved to have the author's admission that "the preceding explanation of the aesthetic [may have been] dizzying." *Art in Action* abounds in conceptual confusions and is not a book to be read quickly. The arrangement in outline form, with each of five parts divided into chapters containing numerous sub-headings, brings coherence to the book. Each section works as a building block for the next. For instance, Part Three on "Art in Christian Perspective" is based on "art" as defined in the forty-six pages of Part Two, entitled "Our Institution of High Art." One feels a mounting sense of comprehension as one moves from the early chapters into the immersion of Wolterstorff's world of the arts in latter sections.

Art in Action comes to grips with some of the essential questions facing the contemporary Western perspective on art. The traditional approach to a work of art consists in isolating the object entirely from the context of action and from the world and intention of the artist, and focusing one's attention simply on the object. However, the modern aesthetic tendencies devalue

experience and the traditional concept of reality.

In his discussion of stylistic diversity, Wolterstorff points out that "a crucial factor in shaping our institution of high art is thus the demise of the habit of making aesthetic judgments by referring to some ideal examples within some paradigm style, and the replacement of that habit with the conviction that within each style aesthetic excellence is attainable." Wolterstorff admits that we have a commitment to works of art as objects of perceptual contemplation. At the same time he argues vehemently for our understanding the nature of artistic creation and its important place in the body of thought concerning art. Through profuse documentation, citing numerous artists, writers, and poets, Wolterstorff claims that the fundamental context within which to consider art is that of the "Christian confession of creation."

One chapter touches on the fascinating paradox that exists between what is true in the real world and what is included in the projected world of an artwork. The distinction between these two worlds is frequently obscured since there are elements of both truth and falsity in the artist's projected world. Although depicted as an alternative to our actual world and not one comprised within it, the projected world of the artist reveals much about the soul of the society from which it emanates. According to Wolterstorff's critique, we must look upon the artist "as one who is allied in fundamental religious convictions with his community." His artistic works "serve more as an expression of the religious convictions of the artist's community, and to confirm that community in those convictions, than to lead it into new ones."

In a latter section of the book, Wolterstorff succinctly sums up his views on the relationships between the artist, religion, and the institution of high art. He describes the Christian artist as one who is capable of assessing priorities and recognizing his responsibility to society; who strives to attain "wholeness" and integrity in his life; who seeks "to bring his

artistic goals into conformity with his Christian commitment...In this way his art will not be separated from life."

Wolterstorff makes a convincing case for a reexamination of our approach to the arts. The artistic community is today striving to become a more integral part of society. Wolterstorff emphasizes the importance of a continually productive and vibrant role for the arts in American society. In fusing his thoughts and views on art, the aesthetic dimension of reality, and his Christian convictions, he advocates art as "man's fulfillment of his calling."

Reviewed by NANCY KLINGHOFFER

At Whim

Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935-1964, by Randall Jarrell, *New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980. xii + 381 pp. \$17.95.*

THE DUST JACKET says that implicit in Randall Jarrell's *Kipling, Auden & Co.* is "a theory of poetry." I should be interested in knowing what the author of that statement conceived the theory to be. Against the claim we might set Jarrell's comment on Kipling: he "was a professional from the day he first said to his ayah, in the vernacular—*not being a professional myself*, I don't know what it was he said..." (italics supplied). Jarrell is clearly correct about himself: he was not a professional, and in that negative lies the charm of this remarkably readable collection. He has about him something of the ironically self-effacing British amateur; his comments on poetry are less remarkable for constituting a theory than as a series of appreciations of the sort which British critics excel in. In reading this new (and unfortunately final) collection of Jarrell's essays I am reminded at times of C.S. Lewis' capacity to relish a poem for its own sake, without regard to